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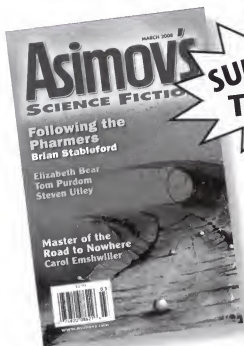
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## JAMES PATRICK KELLY

Every November, three hundred million butterflies arrive in Central Mexico. Every March, cliff swallows flock to San Juan Capistrano. And every June a new story by James Patrick Kelly graces the pages of *Asimov's*. This month marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of the story that initiated this uninterrupted string of tales.

Jim's first June story, the searing tale of "Saint Theresa of the Aliens," was published in 1984. It was also his first story to receive a Nebula nomination. The novelette is well worth checking out, but it was not his first story for *Asimov's*. That honor goes to "Still Time" (August 1983); a tale I encountered as a shy assistant editor. One of only a handful of stories I've ever come across that has to be read in a single sitting, it's a thrilling tale about a man who thinks he's prepared to survive a nuclear war. He has his supplies and he's built his bunker. Unfortunately, when the bombs come, they come with little warning. He's at home working on his shelter, but his daughter is in daycare and his wife is at her job miles from home.

Not long after "Still Time" was published, I attended my first professional Worldcon, and I made up my mind that I had to meet the author of this compelling story. I approached the writer with trepidation and timidly blurted out how much I'd loved the tale. Then I shrank away, mortified by my forwardness. What I didn't know was that Jim was a pretty nervous young author himself. Years later, he told me he'd been floored by my comment because I was the first "New York City editor" to come up and compliment him on his work.

Although I was responsible for many aspects of the production of the magazine, I did not really think of myself as an editor, then. I wasn't choosing the stories, and I was not yet editing any of them ei-

ther. Jim's second June story, however, marked a major transition for me. The story came in during a crisis. We'd always kept a tight rein on our inventory, and while this was fiscally prudent, we found ourselves in a slightly precarious position when the editor had to take a sudden leave of absence to cope with a family emergency. *Asimov's* now had a thirty page hole in its upcoming issue and I had the exciting, if alarming, instructions to fill the hole with the very best material I could find. As I began to read Jim's hallucinogenic submission about a midsummer day at Stonehenge, I started to relax. The result was that "Solstice" (1985) became the very first story I ever purchased for the magazine. The following year's June story, "The Prisoner of Chillon," was a loose sequel to "Solstice." This novelette distinguished itself by becoming the very first winner of our newly instituted Readers' Award.

It was after the publication of "Prisoner" that we realized we had a tradition going. The tradition was of course dependent on three very important factors. First, Jim had to submit a story to us; second, we had to have space for it in the June issue (and no pressing needs to use it in a different month); and third, and most important, we had to like and accept the story. No one really expected all three factors to happen every June (or rather December, which is when the issue is actually put together) or that it would be possible to keep the tradition going for very long. All we did know was that we'd been pretty happy with the stories we'd seen so far.

More important, you seemed pretty happy with Jim's stories, too. In 1990, his story about a wild future in which your mom could be the Statue of Liberty, "Mr. Boy," picked up its own Readers' Award. (What's more, that year Jim shared a

Reader's Award for a poem he co-wrote with Robert Frazier. The poem, however, appeared in our December issue.) Both "Mr. Boy" and our 1991 June tale, "Standing in Line with Mister Jimmy," ended up as finalists for the Nebula Award as well.

"Think Like a Dinosaur," Jim's 1995 June story, was the blockbuster. The spine-tingling novella about what might really happen if we had transporter technology brought him an *SF Chronicle* Award, the Reader's Award, and his very first Hugo Award. It was a finalist for the Nebula too. His quieter 1997 story, "Itsy Bitsy Spider," received the *Locus* Award and made it to the Hugo and Nebula ballots, as well. "Itsy Bitsy Spider" always brings me close to tears. If you want to reread it, you'll find it in our 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Anthology. Jim won another Hugo for his chilling 1999 novelette, "10<sup>16</sup> to 1," and at least three of his subsequent June stories have also been finalists for the major awards.

With the June 1998 issue, Jim's relationship with *Asimov's* grew to include the role of bi-monthly internet columnist. His amusing and informative essays have proven to be popular with you, too. Although these essays have only been with us for a third of the magazine's existence, it seems hard to remember a time when they weren't an essential part of our publication.

Since our first meeting in 1983 my friendship with Jim has also taken on added dimensions. He's become one of my closest confidants, and is often a sounding board for my editorials, though not this one. We've gone boating on the Lamprey River in New Hampshire, and looking for alligators in the Everglades. I sometimes have to light a fire under him when he comes close to missing his "On the Net" deadlines, but it's worth it, since he inevitably turns in such delightful material. Jim and I attended each other's wedding, and my whole family made it to Boston for his fiftieth birthday. And each year, like those who await the swallows and the butterflies, I look forward to the beauty that will be found in the tale that becomes the James Patrick Kelly June story. ○

# Asimov's

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# REFLECTIONS

## IN THE BUSH OF GHOSTS

by Robert Silverberg

There was a time, fifty-plus years ago, when fantasy fiction was the pathetic ragged stepsister of science fiction, a scrawny little genre, beloved only by a special few. Publishing fantasy was a sure way to lose money, and those magazines that specialized in it, notably John W. Campbell's *Unknown Worlds*, had tiny circulations and quickly became sought-after collector's items.

All that changed once J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy became a campus craze in the 1960s. Tolkien paperbacks sold by the zillions, and in their wake came the vast hordes of Tolkien imitations, invariably trilogies (though often the first three in a set led to three sequels, and three more after that) that obediently followed the Tolkien formulas: the Disinherited Prince, the Jolly Sidekick, the Dark Lord, the Slithery Secondary Villain, the Virginal Guardian Angel, the not-so-Virginal Wizardess, the Quest for the Talisman of Power, the climactic struggle between Good and Evil, and all the rest. By now one could fill a whole library with the many fat volumes that endlessly rehearse the tropes of commercial fantasy, and still they come, pretty much the same stuff over and over, so far as I am able to tell, but obviously meeting the needs of an ever-enthusiastic audience.

I would not wish to deprive anyone of any sort of reading pleasure. Reading is a private thing; tastes differ. Go thou, if so you wish, and read trilogy after trilogy, and may you have much joy of it. But I do have a book to recommend to those fantasy readers who might yearn for a less formulaic example of the genre: a novel by an African writer that dips deep into the infinite well of the unconscious and offers a remarkable exercise of the free play of imagination: an extraordinarily

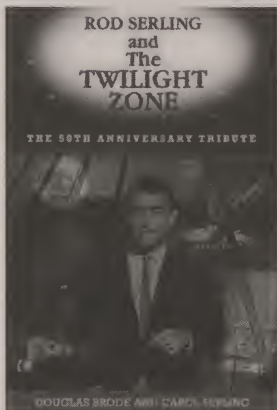
rich journey through a fantastic realm that owes nothing at all to the ritualized formulas of modern post-Tolkien trilogistic fiction.

The book is *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, by Amos Tutuola, first published in 1954, and still in print. Tutuola (1920-1977) was a Nigerian, the son of cocoa farmers who belonged to the Yoruba tribe but had converted to Christianity. After six years of education at a Salvation Army school, he became a blacksmith, then worked at an assortment of menial jobs, and suddenly, in 1946, despite the skimpiness of his education, produced a full-length novel, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. It drew on the folk traditions of the Yoruba tribe for its material and was written in a simple, odd, somewhat naïve but quite literate sort of English. Somehow it found its way into print in England in 1952 and it was widely praised by such people as Dylan Thomas, who called it "grisly and bewitching." It was followed shortly by *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, which also attracted much attention among sophisticated readers, and several other books. Tutuola, now one of Africa's most famous literary figures, ultimately became affiliated with a Nigerian university and then became an associate of the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa.

Technically this astonishing writer has to be classed as a "primitive," along with such other self-educated artists as Grandma Moses and Henri Rousseau. But "primitive" in that context does not mean unskilled or inept. *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* is a potent work of art and, I think, a truer venture into the fantastic than any ten-foot stack of formula trilogies.

A look at some of the chapter headings quickly provides the flavor of the work:





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*In the Nameless-town*  
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*Invisible Magnetic Missive sent to Me from Home*

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The story is the first-person narrative of a seven-year-old boy who, fleeing slave traders that burst into his village, manages to slip into a nearby supernatural realm known as the Bush of Ghosts, which is forbidden to mortal beings, but which he enters because he is too young to know better. (Some definitions: "bush," in the African sense, is a zone of impenetrable jungle. A "ghost," in the Tutuolan sense, is not the spirit of some departed mortal, but simply one of the supernatural beings that inhabit this strange other realm.)

The narrator's sojourn in the Bush of Ghosts lasts twenty-four years, during which time he marries twice, is transformed on occasions into a horse, a cow, and some things much more bizarre, briefly becomes a god, studies how to be dead, and has many other curious adventures, all described in straightforward though idiosyncratic prose derived from the spoken idiom of West Africa. In style it is like nothing ever written by anyone else, and yet it is always intelligible and compelling.

Tutuola's tale is a very peculiar odyssey indeed. When at the outset the narrator blunders into an underground house with a golden portico, he immediately becomes the subject of a quarrel between three ghosts, each of which wants him as a servant. The fuss becomes so intense, we are told, that "all the ghosts and ghostesses of that area" go to the house to settle the dispute. "It was at this time I noticed carefully . . . that many of them had no

hands and some had no fingers, some had no feet and arms but jumped instead of walking. Some had heads without eyes and ears, but I was very surprised to see them walking about day and night without missing their way. . . .”

In the end he is carried off by the “smelling-ghost,” a loathsome creature who wears live scorpions on the rings on his fingers, venomous snakes wrapped around his head, and a boa constrictor as a trouser belt. He pops the boy in a bag, intending to take him to the 7th Town of Ghosts, where he lives. An attempt to escape by climbing a “gravity tree” comes to nothing, and in the smelling-ghost’s town the boy is changed into a monkey, a lion, a horse, a camel, a cow, and then a horse again. While briefly back in human form he seizes the juju—the magical talisman—that his master has used to effect these transformations, and bolts off into the forest. “But as any ghost could run faster than any earthly person, so that I became tired before him, and when he was about to catch me or when his hand was touching my head slightly to catch it, then I used the juju which I took from the hidden place that he kept it in before we left the house. And at the same moment that I used it, it changed me to a cow with horns on its head instead of a horse, but I forgot before I used it that I would not be able to change back to the earthly person again. . . .” So it is as a cow that he makes his escape, only to fall into the hands of a tribe of cow-herding ghosts who beat him cruelly in order to induce him to graze on grass, “as I was unable to explain to these cow-men that I am not really a cow.”

Another escape follows. He regains his own form and hides in a dead log that is already inhabited by a snake; the two of them frighten each other. Another capture, another escape, and he comes to the town of the burglar-ghosts, who exchange themselves with human children to gain access to houses and rob them, and makes a friend who takes him to another town where he sees “a very beautiful young ghostess” and arranges to be mar-

ried to her. (Time is passing; he is growing up.) His marriage first involves him in a baptism in hot water and fire; then, at his new in-laws’ house, comes a frenzied party “where everybody was served with a variety of food and all kinds of ghost-drinks. . . . Also all the terrible-creatures sent their representatives as ‘Skulls,’ ‘Long-white creature,’ ‘Invincible and Invisible Pawn’ or ‘Give and Take’ . . .”

In the course of the party, we learn, “I mistakenly smashed a small ghost to death” while dancing too fiercely. He is put on trial, but acquitted with the help of a kindly ghost-lawyer. After three months of married life he is overcome by yearning to return to his native village in the real world, and sets out on his own, quickly getting himself transformed into a long-necked monster and sequestered in a room guarded by a thousand snakes, and he sees “that the biggest and longest among these snakes which was acting as a director for the rest vomited a kind of coloured lights from his mouth on to the floor of the room.” The snakes disappear and he is imprisoned now in a giant pitcher. He is stolen, pitcher and all, by a different tribe of ghosts who worship him as a god and bring him a sacrificial offering of meat, which he proceeds to eat, surprising them greatly, for none of their other gods were able to eat or breathe.

His life as a god is an enjoyable one, though the sacrificial blood they pour over him attracts too many flies for his comfort. The high priest gives him “a kind of smoking pipe which was about six feet long. . . . This smoking pipe could contain half a ton of tobacco at a time. When [the priest] lit the pipe with fire then the whole of the ghosts and ghostesses were dancing round me set by set. They were singing, clapping hands, ringing bells, and their ancestral drummers were beating the drums in such a way that all the dancers were jumping up with gladness.”

And so it goes. He is buried alive by the spider-ghosts and dug up by a cannibal-ghost; then he is found by a tribe of short

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Jim Martin

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ghosts who bring him to their queen, the "flash-eyed mother," who has "millions of heads which were just like a baby's head," each head having "two very short hands which were used to hold their food." After some years with these ghosts he becomes embroiled in a war involving many kinds of ghosts, during which he is beheaded, and when he and other dead warriors are revived he finds that he has mistakenly been given a ghost's head instead of his own. "But as every ghost is talkative, so this head was always making various noises both day and night and also smelling badly. . . ."

And so it goes, one free-association nightmare after another. The reader learns of his second marriage and the birth of his half-ghost son, and of the town where mosquitoes are worshipped as gods, and of how he brings Christiani-

ty to the ghosts and founds The Methodist Church of the Bush of Ghosts, and becomes a policeman and then a judge in a town of dead people, and takes part in a contest of magicians in classic folk-myth style, and so on and so on, until the book comes to its very well handled conclusion. It's wonderful stuff. By diving down into the mysterious underworld of his people's mythology, Amos Tutuola was able, in 174 pages, to take his readers on a magical journey through a fantasy-world that seemed to me ever so much more real and powerful than what one would encounter in most of the standard prefabricated fantasy novels that crowd our bookstores today. It's not going to be to everyone's taste; but those readers who are looking for something unusual in the way of fantasy will get much delight from it. ○

## MIND THE GAP

*cut by the edge*

**R**ecently I've been musing about generations of science fiction writers. Back in 1986, my pal **Michael Swanwick** <[michaelswanwick.com](mailto:michaelswanwick.com)> published a remarkable if controversial essay in these pages entitled "A User's Guide to the Post Moderns," in which he introduced some of the writers of my generation to the readers of *Asimov's*. Alas, Michael's survey does not live anywhere on the web, although it has been reprinted several times. He centered his narrative on the alleged literary wars between the cyberpunks and the humanists, which was actually more like contretemps than combat, but let that go. Because this was Swanwick at his most provocative, there were many quotable passages, but one that has stuck with me through the years assessed the influence of the generation of writers that came immediately before mine on the then-current scene. This would include such worthies as **Joe Haldeman** <[home.earthlink.net/~haldeman/](mailto:home.earthlink.net/~haldeman/)>, **George R.R. Martin** <[georgerrmartin.com](mailto:georgerrmartin.com)>, **Gardner Dozois** <[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gardner\\_Dozois](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gardner_Dozois)> (who before his stint as editor of this esteemed publication was widely recognized as one of our best short story writers), **Gregory Benford** <[gregorybenford.com](mailto:gregorybenford.com)>, and **Vonda McIntyre** <[vondanmcintyre.com](mailto:vondanmcintyre.com)>, among others. Michael wrote, "These writers are all still producing, and in many cases turning out their best work to date, but the cutting edge of change has moved beyond them. In biological terms, they have donated their genetic material and are now superfluous to our argument."

I remember feeling a chill as I read

this, since if the cutting edge could pass these talented writers by, many of whom were my literary heroes, might it not someday make my generation genetically superfluous as well?

*gapped*

This summer the Hugo Award winning writer and keen genre observer **Elizabeth Bear** <[elizabethbear.com](mailto:elizabethbear.com)> blogged about signs of a generation gap. She asserts <[matociquala.livejournal.com/1415042.html](http://matociquala.livejournal.com/1415042.html)> that short story writers of one generation don't read writers of other generations.

I wonder when the last time was that **Bob Silverberg** <[majipoor.com](mailto:majipoor.com)> read a story by **Benjamin Rosenbaum** <[benjaminrosenbaum.com](mailto:benjaminrosenbaum.com)>, **David Moles** <[chrononaut.org](http://chrononaut.org)>, or **Yoon Ha Lee** <[pegasus.cityofveils.com](http://pegasus.cityofveils.com)>? See, I'm thinking I'm on to something here. There's a generation gap in SFF; we're having different conversations, the Greatest Generation, the Baby Boomers, and Generation X. And as the Millennials (really, guys, this Gen Y thing has to stop: grant the kids their own identity) enter the genre, they too will be having their own argument.

Now there are all kinds of cavils one could make here, starting with the fact that not only has Bob Silverberg read Ben Rosenbaum and Yoon Ha Lee, but he has bought stories from them for *Science Fiction: The Best of 2002*, which he edited with Karen Haber. And Elizabeth herself is at pains to say, "I read because I know I need to keep an eye on the genre, I need to know what's going on, I have stuff to keep up on." Nevertheless,

she reports that when she asked around about who had read what stories from the various best of the year anthologies, her admittedly unscientific survey confirmed her suspicions. My own experience is similar: my fellow post-moderns—or Baby Boomers—can be as insular as any other generation. Sure, there are individuals who read widely, but in general, I, too, think Ms. Bear is on to something here.

When **John Klima** <[www.tor.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=blog&id=2815](http://www.tor.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=blog&id=2815)> mentioned the Unread Generations Syndrome post in several posts on the new **Tor** <[tor.com](http://tor.com)> website, it sparked interesting conversations. Many complained with justification that it is impossible to track all of the stories published each year. Consider that **Mark R. Kelly** <[locusmag.blogspot.com](http://locusmag.blogspot.com)>, writing in **Locus's** <[locusmag.com](http://locusmag.com)> 2007 year end summary, reports that there were 2109 original stories published in magazines, books, and online—not counting those in semi-pro or amateur 'zines. Readers tend to stick with what they know and, when writers read, it makes sense that they would follow the careers of those with whom they share literary sensibilities. Often as not, these common sensibilities map onto generations, although I wonder whether hard science fiction writers of a certain age take all that much interest in sword and sorcery writers of the same age. Soon posters on the Tor site began to exchange suggested reading lists for those seeking to broaden their horizons, most of which are well worth a peek.

Tor Senior Editor—and Hugo winner—Patrick Nielsen Hayden weighed in with a post entitled “**The Dying Earth**” <[tor.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=blog&id=3316](http://tor.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=blog&id=3316)>, in which he wondered why younger writers have been all but shut out of the Hugos and Nebulas. He pointed to the website of astute Irish critic **Nicholas Whyte** <[nicholaswhyte.info/sitemap.htm](http://nicholaswhyte.info/sitemap.htm)>, which lists **all the winners of these awards** <[nicholaswhyte.info/sf/nh2.htm](http://nicholaswhyte.info/sf/nh2.htm)>, along with their date of birth. Only two born in

the 1970s have won Hugos: the aforementioned Elizabeth Bear and **Tim Pratt** <[timpratt.org](http://timpratt.org)>. Patrick wrote, “When I was a young SF reader, Hugos were regularly won by people in their twenties and early thirties.” For example, if you visit Nicholas's site, you'll be reminded that Joe Haldeman was thirty-three when he won his first Hugo, George R.R. Martin was twenty-seven, **Samuel R. Delany** <[www2.pcc.com/staff/jay/delany](http://www2.pcc.com/staff/jay/delany)> was twenty-eight, **Roger Zelazny** <[roger-zelazny.com](http://roger-zelazny.com)> was twenty-nine and our own Robert Silverberg was thirty-four. Patrick writes, “I argued a bit with Elizabeth Bear's assertion of a generation gap in modern SF, but I'm beginning to think she may have a point. There's plenty of SF and fantasy being written by younger people, but evidently the people who vote on the Hugos and Nebulas aren't among its readers.”

In the comments section, Elizabeth Bear offers a new data point on the generation gap: “I've been observing for a while that there's a Wiscon crowd and a Worldcon crowd, and they don't overlap all that much.” The WorldCon, of course, is the World Science Fiction Convention. This year's edition is **Anticipation** <[anticipationsf.ca](http://anticipationsf.ca)> in Montreal. **Wiscon** <[wiscon.info](http://wiscon.info)>, for those who are wondering, bills itself as “The World's Leading Feminist Science Fiction Convention.” It is at once much smaller than WorldCon and vastly more hip. If you want your say in conversations that are shaping the genre, book a ticket to Madison, Wisconsin next Memorial Day. Here's Elizabeth Bear's take:

The Wiscon crowd is younger, queerer, more radical, more female, and more chromatically and culturally diverse. They read and publish in **Strange Horizons** <[strangehorizons.com](http://strangehorizons.com)> and **Interzone** <[tta.press.com/category/interzone](http://tta.press.com/category/interzone)>, and they complain that they can't get any major award recognition or a novel contract, despite all their **Pushcart Prize** <[pushcartprize.com](http://pushcartprize.com)> nominations.

The Worldcon crowd is older, straighter, whiter, more conservative, and more invested in Fandom As A Way of Life. They read and publish in *Asimov's* <do you really need the URL?> and *F&SF* <fandsf.com>, and they like to complain that there just don't seem to be any SFF writers under the age of thirty-five.

*Gulp!* I've been to twenty-one Worldcons but have yet to attend the fabled Wiscon. As someone who regularly checks himself for signs of early-onset superfluosness, you'll pardon me if I take this opportunity to squirm.

### *mars needs women*

As if it isn't bad enough that our little corner of literature might be suffering a generation gap, consider that many would argue that we are suffering from gender imbalance as well. While this has been a longstanding perception, it was raised to the level of statistical certainty by a 2002 article in *Strange Horizons* called "**SF and Fantasy in the New Millennium: Women Publishing Short Fiction**" <[strangehorizons.com/2007/20070820/0women-publish-a.shtml](http://strangehorizons.com/2007/20070820/0women-publish-a.shtml)> by Susan U. Linville. Susan found that only 26 percent of the stories published in the "Big Four" print magazines (*Asimov's*, *F&SF*, *Analog* <[analogsf.com](http://analogsf.com)>, and *Realms of Fantasy* <[rofmagazine.com](http://rofmagazine.com)>) in 2001 were by women. How to account for this? She discounts the possibility of gender-based editorial bias, since both *F&SF* and *Asimov's* have had both male and female editors over the years and the data on their various tenures suggest that "male editors do not publish significantly fewer stories by women than their female counterparts." Shawna McCarthy at *Realms of Fantasy* published a higher percentage of women than men, but Susan opines that this might be because women tend to write more fantasy than science fiction. Perhaps the reason why fewer woman were published was that fewer women submitted to these markets? In a 2007 follow-up article, **SF and Fantasy in the New Millennium: An**

**Update** <[strangehorizons.com/2007/20070820/1women-update-a.shtml](http://strangehorizons.com/2007/20070820/1women-update-a.shtml)>, Susan Linville obtained access to submissions data from the Big Four and found that "It seems clear that overt editorial bias is not to blame for women's low representation in short fiction. Instead, lack of participation by women remains the clear villain."

But if the editors aren't the problem, then what is? Why aren't more women participating? What will it take to redress this imbalance? These articles have fanned a firestorm of controversy, as the genre continues to wrestle with an issue that goes to the core of its identity. Recently two roundtables have gathered of some of our best minds to mull the problem over. On the *F&SF* site, check out "**Women Writing Science Fiction: Some Voices from the Trenches**" <[sfsite.com/fsf/2008/sl0810.htm](http://sfsite.com/fsf/2008/sl0810.htm)>, edited by Susan Elizabeth Lyons, which presents fifteen women writers writing about how they came to read and write SF, what has changed over their careers, and what they think about the gender bias question. Meanwhile, at *SF Signal* <[sfsignal.com](http://sfsignal.com)>, the excellent Mind Meld feature gathered together a group of writers and editors, men and women, to address the question, **Is There Gender Imbalance in Genre Fiction Publishing?** <[sfsignal.com/archives/006846.html](http://sfsignal.com/archives/006846.html)>. The participants have cast both heat and light on the problem.

### *exit*

It seems to me that these gaps in science fiction—both generation and gender—are very much related. I've been at this writing gig a while and I've watched the genre undergo profound change, philosophically, demographically, and technologically. Science fiction has become bigger in every sense of the word. Of course readers and writers who are coming into their own in this wonderful and dangerous century deserve their chance to . . . wait, what's that noise?

Hey, you kids! Get off my lawn. ○



# THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS

## ON JAMES PATRICK KELLY

**Our current issue marks the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of James Patrick Kelly's first "June" story, "Saint Theresa of the Aliens." Jim has had a story in every June issue since. Now, seven of his friends, colleagues, and students join in a salute to this remarkable feat.**

**Exponential Numbers, Chairs,  
Nursery Rhymes, and Marlon  
Brando: A Comment on James  
Patrick Kelly**

*Connie Willis*

**O**kay, here's the problem with James Patrick Kelly. In the first place, he's *not* James Patrick Kelly, he's Jim, and whoever heard of a genius named *Jim*? You didn't hear anybody calling James Dean "Jim."

In the second place, geniuses are supposed to be dark, difficult, egotistical, tortured, arrogant, brooding, unreliable, passionate, and complex. They're supposed to dress in black leather, do and say outrageous things, drink too much, engage in brawls, and then either A) wrap their Porsche around a tree or B) OD in an Olsen twin's apartment. You know, Marlon Brando. Norman Mailer. Mozart.

Jim is nothing like that. He's sunny, friendly, unaffected, responsible, even-tempered, and so socially well-adjusted he even went to his senior prom. He's fun, funny, and charming, and we're just not used to geniuses looking and acting like this.

Nevertheless, he *is* a bona fide genius.

The trick is that he saves all that darkness and complexity and passion for his writing. He's devoted his life to that most difficult, tormented, and outrageous of art forms—the short story—and has produced a series of brilliant, multifaceted, perfectly-cut gems—"Dancing with Chairs," "The Cruellest Month," "10<sup>16</sup> to 1," "Rat"—dealing with subjects from nanotechnology to the Statue of Liberty to fruitcake, and with genres from hard SF to comedy to slipstream. No matter what he's doing, his stories have flawless construction, pitch-perfect voice, and an uncanny ability to take the most harmless of subjects—a toy telephone, say—and transform them into something dangerous, to take the most tired of clichés and show them to us in a way that makes them not only look brand-new, but gives us a new and profound insight into them.

My personal favorite story (aside from whichever one I happen to be currently reading) is "Itsy Bitsy Spider," a tale about nursing homes and robots. But under the deceptively simple surface lies a profound look at guilt, atonement, and the infinitely complicated relations between fathers and children. And all in a few short easy-to-read pages. Nobody else could do that. And nobody else could have written "Men Are Trouble," "Chemistry," "Think Like a Dinosaur," "The Leila Torn Show," "April is the Cruellest Month," or "Why School Buses are Yellow."

And that, after all, is the nature of genius, isn't it? Being and doing something unique and irreplaceable. Including being the first-ever genius named Jim.

A disclaimer: I freely admit I've been crazy about Jim Kelly since the moment I met him sitting in the hall at a Worldcon thirty years ago. He's been a wonder-

ful, supportive friend all those years, and there's still nobody I would rather sit in the hall or do anything else with. For this reason, what I say about him should probably be taken with a massive grain of salt. Except about his writing. Loving the author and loving his work are two *entirely* different things, and I would read his stories with the same admiration and delight if I'd never met him. But I'm thankful every day I did.

*Many of Connie Willis's Hugo- and Nebula-Award-winning stories first appeared in our pages. She recently turned a long awaited novel, All Clear, in to her publisher, and we're hoping this means we'll soon be seeing a run of new short tales from her.*

Karen Joy Fowler

I knew and loved Jim Kelly by work and by reputation before we even met. I had published a few stories myself and was just starting to attend some cons, west coast only, ones I could drive to. So I was meeting some writers and hearing about others. Jim Kelly's name came up frequently and what was said about him was pretty uniform. Jim Kelly, I was told on more than one occasion, is the nicest guy in science fiction.

I finally met Jim at a Kinko's in Raleigh, North Carolina. We've known each other for decades now and, over that time, I've heard him called other things as well—the plot doctor, the shape-shifter. Yes, he is much more than just nice. He is witty, brainy, ambitious, and accomplished. He is great company, the best, in fact—interested in everything, well read, perceptive, and occasionally, but nicely, competitive.

But I want to say a few words here in favor of niceness. Maybe I feel defensive because a writer whose story I was critiquing once told me he thought the worst response anyone could have to his work was to say it was nice. Maybe I HAD just said it was nice. I don't remember. But in my brain and my mouth,

there is nothing simple or simple-minded about niceness. It's a lot harder than it looks. Sure, anyone can manage brief public displays of it. But the genuine article? The nicest guy in science fiction? If it were easy, everyone would be that.

Over the years I've seen Jim be nice in public and in private, in good times and in bad, before coffee and after wine. I have seen Jim be nice on little sleep and less food. Jim's sort of niceness takes effort, attentiveness, wit, and imagination. It is an interesting, a provocative, sparky sort of niceness, nothing reflexive or dull about it. It is magnetic. When Jim is on one side of a party and I am on the other, then I know I am not in the place I want to be.

I wouldn't characterize Jim's work as nice. Some of it is, but some of it is rough or edgy or sly. He is a quintessentially protean writer; no single adjective suffices for the whole. I have read a ton of Jim Kelly and I continue to be regularly surprised at where he goes and what he's doing with his fiction. With the name removed, I'm not convinced I would recognize all of his stories as his. That, like niceness, is another hard thing to pull off.

Much of our relationship has taken place in the context of the Sycamore Hill writing workshop. On the day my story is on the block, Jim's response is one I await with a particular nervous anxiety. Jim is a brilliant critic, and strong, as I am not, on plot. But that's not why I'm nervous. I'm nervous because I know Jim will have given me a generous reading. An ungenerous reading can sink a brilliant story. But a story that doesn't survive a generous reading is a story with problems. Even when that critique is delivered in the nicest possible way.

*Karen Joy Fowler's latest novels are Wit's End and The Jane Austen Book Club. Her most recent Nebula award was for the short story, "Always," that appeared in our April/May 2006 issue.*

### Bruce Sterling

James Patrick Kelly has a solid New England yeoman reticence. Kelly lacks the showboating weirdness of many science fiction writers, guys who tend to have spikey, odd, finny names, like Lem or Pohl or Poul or Sturgeon. In person Kelly comes across as a bluff-looking Irish guy bouncing a basketball.

But I've spent a lot of time in close quarters with James Patrick Kelly. He never behaves as a gaseous interstellar intellectual, yet he is nevertheless keenly and even somewhat scarily intelligent. Thinking back over the Kelly oeuvre, I'm struck not by its solid craft but by its visionary qualities.

Most writers crafting a story whose protagonist is a thieving street rat would be playing mythical and metaphorical tricks; a Kafka-style fantasy riff of a man turned into a rat, a Philip Dick ontological charade of melting realities. In the Kelly story "Rat," the rat is very simply and lucidly a rat. He's a big urban rat in soiled clothes who lives in a nest of tattered dollar bills.

Not much is made of this; there's no fancy sleight-of-hand about it. Not only do we not ask how this happened, we're somehow maneuvered into a situation where we can't even ask.

Much the same goes for the Kelly character whose mother is the Statue of Liberty. This conceit sounds a lot more fey than it is in practice; by the time we're dragged through the bizarre yet quotidian world of that story, Mom's statuesque proportions are the least of our difficulties.

James Patrick Kelly knows what he's doing, ladies and gentlemen. I've seen him do it, not just with his own work but other people's. How often I've quietly marveled as he takes damaged works of fiction in hand, skillfully breaks them down to their functional components, and deftly reassembles them so they run lighter, faster, and cleaner. Nobody applauds him for it. They just stare at him, with the vaguely discom-

forted look of creatives who should have thought about it that way all along.

There are few to match him.

*Multiple Hugo-Award-winning author, Bruce Sterling is considered a co-founder of the Cyberpunk Literary movement. The author's most recent novel is The Carylatsids.*

### Jonathan Lethem

You never get a second chance to make a first impression, sure, but James Patrick Kelly—Jim to me, now—actually got to make three first impressions on me. Three at least. As a ravenous teenager, awed by the field I was trying to enter, he stood (in my mind) as the dangerously cool older brother whose omnipresent preeminence (omnipreminence?) I'd have to both emulate and, well, partly overthrow, in order to hang my own star in the sky. With Fowler, Kessel, Robinson, Shepherd—among others, but for me, those above all—he represented the flavor of line-by-line literary chops, ambidextrous talent, and cocksure ambition that it seemed to me was just then taking over the genre's short story tradition. In other words, in my mind's eye, he looked a bit like James Dean looks to Sal Mineo in *Rebel Without a Cause*. Then, when quite suddenly I found myself competing against him for a Nebula Award for best novella, before we'd ever met, Jim defied the rivalrous situation, dropped a postcard's jotting of gracious, comradely praise into my mailbox, out of nowhere, still just about the most angelic collegial gesture I've ever experienced from another writer. There was no reason he had to do it, but he did—and with a single stroke, made me feel welcomed into a community I still could barely imagine the reality of. Last, I actually got to know him. And he turned out, yes, to be that brilliant writer who'd written those stories that had made that impression, and that improbably

kind soul who'd sent me the comradely postcard, but he was also one of the least pretentious, most charming, raffish, and simply likeable persons-whocall-themselves-writer, I'd ever met or ever hope to.

The funny thing about the dumb opening joke I started out with here, is that it seems to me that the brilliance of the storyteller James Patrick Kelly, that master of freshness and surprise, is accidentally captured there: he goes on making first impressions, against all law or likelihood, reinventing himself each time out, always questioning the basic premise of what a science fiction short story can be, or a James Patrick Kelly story, or a story in the first place. May he for many Junes to come.

*Jonathan Lethem won the National Book Critics Circle Award for his novel Motherless Brooklyn. His next book, Chronic City, will be out in the fall.*

## Two Student Perspectives:

### Cory Doctorow

Jim gave me the single best piece of writing advice I've ever received—on my first day of Clarion, no less! The night before, he'd called for volunteers willing to have their "audition" stories critiqued the next day, as none of us had written anything new for the workshop. Being a cocky twenty-year-old, I immediately put my hand up and submitted "The Adventures of Ma 'n' Pa Frigidaire" (of which I was inordinately proud). That evening,

my fellow students came around one after another to tell me how great the story was, and the next day in the critiquing circle, my roommate started his critique with "I share my toilet with a genius."

Then it came to Jim and he said, "Cory Doctorow, you are an asshole." (He was smiling when he said this). "You've managed to convince sixteen intelligent, talented writers that this story has something to it, despite the fact that it's all pyrotechnics and no heart. You need to learn to sit down at the keyboard and open a vein."

That one piece of advice turned out to be the single most important thing anyone's said to me about making art in all my career. I suppose I could have gone home after day one and worked on it for the next five years (and that's how long it took me to figure it out!). But then I would have missed all the camaraderie and tutelage that followed.

*Cory Doctorow, who won the John W. Campbell Award for best new writer in 2000, is a co-editor of the weblog Boing Boing. His most recent novel, Little Brother, was published last year.*

### Sandra McDonald

Jim Kelly leans forward when he gives you a critique of your work. Eyes intent, face animated. Or he leans backward, fingers laced on chest, gaze turning skyward. When he's on his feet in front of a classroom he's a man in motion, waving his arms as he conjures magic. Though

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often he stands still—relaxed but focused. When I first met him at the Viable Paradise workshop in 2001, I thought, “Clearly this man has some energy in him.” Not only energy, but wit and charm, and a very smart sense of what stories do and how to make them work. If I believed in chakras, I’d say there’s a spinning vortex of storytelling and compassion nestled right beside his heart. When Jim joined the staff of my MFA program, I held my breath and stomped up and down until they assigned him to me as my mentor. For a solid year I got to pester him with my writing and watch him slice through my paragraphs with a rapier. Best year’s education I ever got. Now other students get their turn at the table, and I’m honored to be sharing these same pages of *Asimov’s*. Thanks, Jim, for all you’ve taught me—and continue to teach me—about the craft and joy of writing.

P.S. Last summer some of his former students and I put together a tribute book—forty or so essays from Jim’s students. You can download a free copy at [lulu.com/content/2648885](http://lulu.com/content/2648885).

*Sandra McDonald is the author of three novels. You'll find her first story for Asimov's on page 72.*

## The Modest One

*John Kessel*

The first thing we like in science fiction is the future. The gadget that is used in ordinary everyday life, the sideways perspective on things we think we know, the sudden startling change accepted without astonishment. Jim Kelly gives me lots of these moments. In “Undone,” I love it when the heroine folds up her spaceship and puts it into her pocket. In “Unique Visitors” I laugh at the notion of the Beverly Hillbillies as time travelers. I’m startled and amused that

Mr. Boy’s mother has had herself transformed into a three-quarter-scale replica of the Statue of Liberty (and the only reason she isn’t full-scale is the zoning laws).

But what sticks in my mind most are the human moments. At the end of *Burn* the hero Spur stops by the body of his wife, feels the fabric of her shroud between his thumb and finger, and remembers how as children they would play dead. The end of “The First Law of Thermodynamics” when Space the college student in 1970 steps through a doorway and becomes Jack Casten, a fortyish high school teacher in front of his bored science class. The powerful ironies at the end of “Think Like a Dinosaur,” made real in the touch of Kamala’s long nails on Michael Burr’s cheek. The loneliness of the boy in “ $10^{16}$  to 1” alleviated but not cured by the appearance of a time traveler who doesn’t realize the simple reality that a twelve-year-old in 1962 can’t just walk into a store and spend a hundred dollar bill.

What I guess I’m saying is I like the way Jim Kelly writes real science fiction, and makes it art. Jim entertains me, and makes me think, and makes me feel. All without showing off. I know he wants recognition as much as anyone, I know somewhere inside him he wants to shout about his accomplishments. He longs to live forever through his writing as much as any person ever has. But he lets the work speak for itself.

I admire and try to emulate his generosity as a writer and a person. He gives it all. He has a sense of proportion, a sense of humor, a sense of tragedy, a sense of balance. He has helped me be a better man. ○

*Nebula-Award-winning author John Kessel's most recent books include two collaborations with James Patrick Kelly: Rewired: The Post-Cyberpunk Anthology and Feeling Very Strange: The Slipstream Anthology.*

# GOING DEEP

James Patrick Kelly

On the twenty-fifth anniversary of his remarkable feat, James Patrick Kelly tells us that he's still amazed at his good fortune in placing a June story every year for so many years with three different editors of *Asimov's*. "I am grateful to Shawna, Gardner, and Sheila for their guidance and to you the readers for your support." In his latest tale, Jim draws a masterful portrait of a preteen about to embark on that treacherous journey to adulthood. Inspiration for the ending to this story came to him while teaching at the Stonecoast Creative Writing MFA program. Jim's latest book, *The Secret History of Science Fiction*, an anthology he is co-edited with longtime co-conspirator John Kessel, will be published by Tachyon Publications in the fall.

Mariska shivered when she realized that her room had been tapping at the dreamfeed for several minutes. "The earth is up," it murmured in its gentle singing accent. "Daddy Al is up and I am always up. Now Mariska gets up."

Mariska groaned, determined not to allow her room in. Recently she had been dreaming her own dreams of Jak and his long fingers and the fuzz on his chin and the way her throat tightened when she brushed up against him. But this was one of her room's feeds, one of the best ones, one she had been having as long as she could remember. In it, she was in space, but she wasn't on the Moon and she wasn't wearing her hardsuit. There were stars every way she turned. Of course, she'd seen stars through the visor of her helmet but these were always different. Not a scatter of light but a swarm. And they were all were singing their names, calling to her to come to them. She could just make out the closest ones: *Alpha Centauri*. *Barnard's*. *Wolf*. *Lalande*. *Luyten*. *Sirius*.

"The earth is up, Daddy Al is up and I am always up." Her room insisted. "Now Mariska gets up." If she didn't wake soon, it would have to sound the gong.

"Slag it." She rolled over, awake and grumpy. Her room had been getting on her last nerve recently. When she had been a little girl, she had roused at its whisper, but in the last few weeks it had begun nagging her to wake up. She knew it loved her and was only worried about her going deep, but she was breathing regularly and her heartbeat was probably in the high sixties. It monitored her, so it had to know she was just sleeping.

She thought this was all about Al. He was getting nervous; so her room was nervous. "*Dobroye utro*," said Feodor Bear. "Good morn-ing Mar-i-ska." The ancient toy robot stood up on its shelf, wobbled and then sat down abruptly. It was over a century old and, in Mariska's opinion, needed to be put out of its misery.

"Good morning, dear Mariska," said her room. "Today is Friday, June 15, 2159. You



are expected today in Hydroponics and at the Muoi swimming pool. This Sunday is Father's Day."

"I know, I *know*." She stuck her foot out from underneath the covers and wiggled her toes in the cool air. Her room began to bring the temperature up from sleeping to waking levels.

"I could help you find something for Daddy Al, if you'd like." Her room painted Buycenter icons on the wall. "We haven't shopped together in a while."

"Maybe later." Sometimes she felt guilty that she wasn't spending enough time with her room, but its persona kept treating her like a baby. Still calling him *Daddy Al*, for example; it was embarrassing. And she would get to all her expectations eventually. What choice did she have?

The door slid aside a hand's width and Al peered through the opening.

"Rise and shine, Mariska." His smile was a crack on a worried face. "Pancakes for breakfast," he said. "But only if you get up now." He blew a kiss that she ducked away from.

"I'm shining already," she grumbled. "Your own little star."

As she stepped through the cleanser, she wondered what to do about him. She knew exactly what was going on. The *Gorshkov* had just returned from exploring the *Delta Pavonis* system, which meant they'd probably be hearing soon from Natalya Volochkova. And Mariska had just turned thirteen; in another year she'd be able to vote, sign contracts, get married. This was the way the world worked: now that she was almost an adult, it was time for Al to go crazy. All her friends' parents had. The symptoms were hard to ignore: embarrassing questions like *where was she going* and *who was she going with* and *who else would be there*? He said he trusted her but she knew he'd slap a trace on her if he thought he could get away with it. But what was the point? This was the Moon. There were security cams over every safety hatch. How much trouble could she get into? Walk out an airlock without a suit? She wasn't suicidal—or dumb. Have sex and get pregnant? She was *patched*—when she finally jumped a boy, pregnancy wouldn't be an issue. Crash from some toxic feed? She was young—she'd get over it.

The fact that she loved Al's strawberry pancakes did nothing to improve her mood at breakfast. He was unusually quiet, which meant he was working his courage up for some stupid fathering talk. Something in the news? She brought her gossip feed up on the tabletop to see what was going on. The scrape of his knife on the plate as she scanned headlines made her want to shriek. Why did he have to use her favorite food as a bribe so that he could pester her?

"You heard about that boy from Penrose High?" he said at last. "The one in that band you used to like . . . No Exit? Final Exit?"

"You're talking about Last Exit to Nowhere?" That gossip was so old it had curled around the edges and blown away. "Deltron Cleen?"

"That's him." He stabbed one last pancake scrap and pushed it into a pool of syrup. "They say he was at a party a couple of weeks ago and opened his head to everyone there, I forget how many mindfeeds he accepted."

"So?" She couldn't believe he was pushing Deltron Cleen at her.

"You knew him?"

"I've met him, sure."

"You weren't there, were you?" He actually squirmed, like he had ants crawling up his leg. "When it happened?"

"Oh sure. And when he keeled over, I was the one who gave him CPR." Mariska pinched her nose closed and puffed air at him. "Saved his life—the board of supers is giving me a medal next Thursday."

"This is serious, Mariska. Taking feeds from people you don't know is dangerous."

"Unless they're schoolfeeds. Or newsfeeds. Or dreamfeeds."

"Those are datafeeds. And they're screened."

"God feeds, then."

He sank back against his chair. "You're not joining a church, are you?"

"No." She laughed and patted his hand. "I'm okay, Al. Trust me. I love you and everything is okay."

"I know that." He was so flustered he slipped his fork in his pants pocket. "I know," he repeated, as if trying to convince himself.

"Poor Del is pretty stupid, even for a singer in a shoutcast band," she said. "What I heard was he accepted maybe a dozen feeds, but I guess there wasn't room in his head for more than him and a couple of really shallow friends. But he just crashed is all; they'll reboot him. Might even be an improvement." She reached across the table, picked up Al's empty plate and slid it onto hers. "You never did anything like that, did you?" She carried them to the kitchen counter and pushed them through the processor door. "Accept mindfeeds from perfect strangers?"

"Not strangers, no."

"But you *were* young once, right? I mean, you weren't born a parent?"

"I'm a father, Mariska." He swiped his napkin across his lips and then folded it up absently. "You're a minor and still my responsibility. This is just me, trying to stay in touch."

"Extra credit to you, then." She check-marked the air. "But being a father is complicated. Maybe we should work on your technique?"

The door announced, "Jak is here."

"Got to go." Mariska grabbed her kit, kissed Al and spun toward the door in relief. She felt bad for him sometimes. It wasn't his fault he took all the slag in the *Talking To Your Teen* feed so seriously.

Of course, the other reason why Al was acting up was because Mariska's genetic mother was about to swoop down on them. The *Gorshkov* had finally returned after a fifteen-year mission and was now docked at Sweetspot Station. Rumor was that humankind had a terrestrial world to colonize that was only three years away from the new *Delta Pavonis* wormhole. Natalya Volochkova was on the starship's roster as chief medical officer.

Mariska didn't hate her mother exactly. How could she? They had never met. She knew very little about Volochkova and had no interest in finding out more. Ever, never. All she had from her were a couple of fossil toys: Feodor Bear and that stupid Little Mermaid aquarium. Collector's items from the twenty-first century, which was why Mariska had never been allowed to play with them.

What she did hate was the idea that decisions this stranger had made a decade and a half ago now ruled her life. She was Volochkova's clone and had been carried to term in a plastic womb, then placed in the care of one Alfred DeFord, a licensed father, under a term adoption contract. Her genetic mother had hired Al the way that some people hired secretaries; three-fifths of Volochkova's salary paid for their comfortable if unspectacular lifestyle. Mariska knew that Al had come to love her over the years, but growing up with an intelligent room and a hired father for parents wouldn't have been her choice, had she been given one.

As if parking her with a hired father wasn't bad enough, Volochkova had cursed Mariska with spacer genes. Which was why she had to suffer though all those boring pre-space feeds from the Ed supers and why everyone was so worried that she might go deep into hibernation before her time and why she'd been matched with her one true love when she had been in diapers.

Actually, having Jak as a boyfriend wasn't all that much of a problem. She just wished that that it didn't have to be so damn inevitable. She wanted to be the one to decide that a curly black mop was sexier than a blonde crewcut or that thin lips were more kissable than thick or that loyal was more attractive than smart. He was fifteen, already an adult, but still lived with his parents. Even though he was two years older than she was, they were in the same semester in the spacer program.

Jak listened as Mariska whined, first about Volochkova and then about Al's breakfast interrogation, as they skated to the hydroponics lab. He knew when to squeeze her hand, when to emit understanding moans and concerned grunts. This was what he called taking the weight, and she was gratified by his capacity to bear her up when she needed it. They were good together, in the 57<sup>th</sup> percentile on the Hammergeld Scale, according to their Soc super. Although she wondered if there might be some other boy for her somewhere, Mariska was resigned to the idea that, unless she was struck by a meteor or kidnapped by aliens, she would drag him into bed one of these days and marry him when she turned fourteen and then they would hibernate happily ever after on their way to Lalande 21185, or Barnard's Star or wherever.

"But we were there, 'Ska." Jak said, as the safety hatch to the lab slid aside. "Del asked *you* to open your head." He bent over to crank the rollers into the soles of his shoes.

"Which is why we left." She pulled a disposable green clingy from the dispenser next to the safety door and shrugged into it. "Which is why we were already in Chim Zone when the EMTs went by, which means we *weren't* really there. How many times do I have to go over this?" She gave him a friendly push toward his bench and headed toward her own, which was on the opposite side of the lab.

Mariska checked the chemistry of her nutrient solution. Phosphorus was down 50ppm so she added a pinch of ammonium dihydrogen phosphate. She was raising tomatoes in rockwool spun from lunar regolith. Sixteen new blossoms had opened since Tuesday and needed to be pollinated; she used one of the battery operated toothbrushes that Mr. Holmgren, the Ag super, favored. Mariska needed an average yield of 4.2 kilograms per plant in order to complete this unit; her tomatoes wouldn't be ripe for another eight weeks. Jak was on tomatoes too; his spring crop had had an outbreak of mosaic virus and so he was repeating the unit.

Other kids straggled into the lab as she worked. Grieg, who had the bench next to hers, offered one of his lima beans, which she turned down, and a hit from his sniffer, which she took. Megawatt waved hello and Fung stopped by to tell her that their *Gorshkov* tour had been rescheduled for Tuesday, which she already knew.

After a while, Random ambled in, using a vacpac to clean up the nutrient spills and leaf litter. He had just washed out of the spacer program but his mother was a Med super so he was hanging around as a janitor until she decided what to do with him. Everyone knew why he had failed. He was a feed demon; his head was like a digital traffic jam. However, unlike Del Cleen, Random had never once crashed. They said that if you ever opened yourself wide to him, even just for an instant, you would be so filled with other people's thoughts that you would never think your own again.

He noticed her staring and saluted her with the wand of his vacuum cleaner. It was funny, he didn't look all that destroyed to Mariska. Sleepy maybe, or bored, or a little high, but not as if he had had his individuality crushed. Besides, even though he was too skinny, she thought he was kind of cute. Not for the first time, she wondered what their Hammergeld compatibility score might be.

Mariska felt the tingle of Jak offering a mindfeed. She opened her head a crack and accepted.

=giving up for today= She was relieved that Jak just wanted to chat. =you?=

=ten minutes= Mariska was still getting used to chatting in public. She and Jak had been more intimate, of course, had even opened wide for full mental convergence a couple of times, but that had been when they were by themselves, sitting next to each other in a dark room. Swapping thoughts was all the mindfeed she could handle without losing track of where she was. After all, she was still a kid.

=how's your fruit set?= Jak's feed always felt like a fizzing behind her eyes.

=fifty, maybe sixty= She noticed Random drifting toward her side of the lab. =this sucks=

=tomatoes?=-

=hydroponics=

=spacers got to eat=

=spacers suck=

Jak's pleasant fizz gave way to a bubble of annoyance. =you're a spacer=

Mariska had begun to have her doubts about that, but this didn't seem like the right time to bring them up, because Random had shut his vacuum off and slouched beside her bench in silence. His presence was a kind of absence. He seemed to have parked his body in front of her and then forgotten where he had left it.

"What?" She poked his shoulder. "Say something."

Jak bumped her feed. =problem?=-

=just random=

All kids of spacer stock were thin but, with his spindly limbs and teacup waist and translucent skin, Random seemed more a rumor than a boy. His eyelids fluttered and he touched his tongue to his bottom lip, as if he were trying to remember something. "Your mother," he said.

Mariska could feel a ribbon of dread weave into her feed with Jak. She wasn't sure her feet were still on the floor.

=s'ka what?=-

=nothing= Mariska clamped her head closed, then gave Jak a feeble wave to show everything was all right. He didn't look reassured.

"What about my mother?" She hissed at Random. "You don't even know her."

He opened his hand and showed her a small, brown disk. At first she thought it was a button but then she recognized the profile of Abraham Lincoln and realized that it was some old coin from Earth. What was it called? A penalty? No, a *penny*.

"I know this," said Random. "Check the date."

She shrank from him. "No."

Then Jak came to her rescue. He rested a hand on Random's shoulder. "Be smooth now." It didn't take much effort to turn the skinny kid away from her. "What's happening?"

Random tried to shrug from Jak's grip, but he was caught. "Isn't about you."

"Fair enough." Jak always acted polite when he was getting angry. "But here I am. You're not telling me to go away, are you?"

"He says it's about Natalya Volochkova," said Mariska.

Random placed the penny on Mariska's bench. "Check the date."

Jak picked the penny up and held it to the light. "2018," he read. "They used to use this stuff for money."

"I know that," Mariska snapped. She snatched the penny out of his hand and shoved it into the front pouch of her tugshirt.

Random seemed to have lost interest in her now that Jak had arrived. He switched on the vacpac, bent over, and touched the wand to a tomato leaf on the deck. It caught crossways for a moment, singing in the suction, and was gone. Then he sauntered off.

"What's this got to do with your mother?" said Jak.

Mariska had been mad at Random, but since he no longer presented a target, she

decided to be mad at Jak instead. "Don't be stupid. She's not my mother." She saw that Grieg was hunched over his beans, pretending to check the leaves for white flies. From the way his shoulders were shaking, she was certain that he was laughing at her. "Let's get out of here."

Jak looked doubtfully at the chemical dispensers and gardening tools scattered across her bench. "You want to clean up first?"

"No." She peeled off her clingy and threw it at the bench.

Jak tried to cheer her up by doing a flip-scape in the corridor immediately in front of the hydroponics safety hatch. He leapt upward in the Moon's one-sixth gravity, flipped in mid-air and scraped the rollers on the bottom of his shoes across the white ceiling, *skritch, skritch*, leaving skid marks. He didn't quite stick the landing and had to catch himself on the bulkhead. "Let Random clean that." His face flushed with the effort. "That slaghead."

"You're so busted," said Mariska, nodding at the security cam. "They're probably calling your parents even as we speak."

"Not," said Jak. "Megawatt and I smeared the cams with agar last night." He smiled and swiped a lock of curly hair from his forehead. "From Holmgren's own petri dishes. All they've got is blur and closeups of bacteria."

He looked so proud of himself that she couldn't help but grin back at him. "Smooth." Her Jak was the master of the grand and useless gesture.

He reached for her hand. "So where are we going?"

"Away."

They skated in silence through the long corridors of Hai Zone; Jak let her lead. He was much better on rollers than she was—a two-time sugarfoot finalist—and matched her stroke for stroke without loosening or tightening his feathery grip.

"You were mad back there," said Jak.

"Yes."

"Have you heard from your mother yet?"

"I told you, she's not my mother."

"Sure. Your clone, then."

Technically, Mariska was Natalya Volochkova's clone, but she didn't bother to correct him. "Not yet. Probably soon." He gave her hand a squeeze. "Unless I get lucky and she lets me alone."

"I don't see why you care. If she comes to visit, just freeze her out. She'll leave eventually."

"I don't want to see them together. Her and Al." She could just picture Volochkova in their flat. The heroic explorer would sneer at the way her hired father had spent

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the money she had given them. Then she would order Al around and turn off her room's persona and tell Mariska to grow up as if she wasn't trying.

"Move out for a while. Stay with Geetha."

Mariska made a vinegar face. "Her little brother is a brat."

"Come stay with us then. You could sleep in Memaw's room." Jak's grandmother had been a fossil spacer, one of the first generation to go to the stars; she had died back in February.

"Sure, let's try that one on Al. It'll be fun watching the top of his head blow off."

"But my parents would be there."

Being Jak's girlfriend meant having to tolerate his parents. The mom wasn't so bad. A little boring, but then what grownup wasn't? But the dad was a mess. He had washed out of the spacer program when he was Jak's age and his mother—Memaw—had never let him forget it. The dad put his nose in a sniffer more than was good for anyone and, when he was high, he had a tongue on him that could cut steel.

"Weren't your parents there when you and Megawatt set off that smoke bomb in your room?"

Jak blushed. "It was a science experiment."

"That cleared all of Tam Zone." She pulled him to a stop and gave him a brush kiss on the cheek. "Besides, your parents aren't going to be patrolling the hall at all hours. What if I get an overpowering urge in the middle of the night? Who'll protect you?"

"Urge?" He dashed ahead, launched a jump 180 and landed it, skating backward, wiggling his cute ass. "Overpowering?" His stare was at once playful and hungry.

"Show off?" Mariska looked away, embarrassed for both of them. Jak was so pathetically eager; it wasn't right to tease him about sex. It had seemed like a grownup thing to say, but just now she wasn't feeling much like an adult. She needed to get away from Jak. Everybody. Be by herself.

She decided to cue a fake call. When her fingernail flashed, she studied it briefly, then brought it to her ear. "It's Al," she said. "Sorry, Jak, I've got to go."

The swimming pool in Muoi Zone was one of the biggest in the Moon's reservoir system, but Mariska liked it because it didn't have a sky projected on its ceiling. Somehow images of stars and clouds made the water seem colder, even though all the Moon's pools were kept at a uniform twenty-seven degrees Celsius. And she felt less exposed looking up at raw rock. The diving platforms at the deep end were always crowded with acrobats; in the shallows little kids stood on their hands and wiggled their toes and heaved huge, quivering balls of water high into the air. Their shouts of glee echoed off the low ceiling and drowned in the blue expanse of the pool.

The twenty-five lanes were busy as usual with lap swimmers meeting their daily exercise expectation. Mariska owed the Med supers an hour in the pool four times a week. She sat at the edge in lane twelve and waited for an opening. She was wearing the aquablade bodysuit that Al had bought for her birthday. Jak had wanted her to get a tank suit or a two-piece, but she had chosen the neck-to-knee style because her chest was still flat as the lunar plains. That was why she didn't like to swim with Jak—when they stood next to each other in swimsuits, she looked like his baby sister.

She eased into the cool water just behind an old guy in a blue speedo and cued up the datafeed she was supposed to review on ground squirrels.

=The hibernating *Spermophilus tridecemlineatus* can spend six months without food. During this period its temperature drops to as low as zero Celsius. With a heart rate at 1 percent of its active state and oxygen consumption at 2 percent, the squirrel can survive solely on the combustion of its lipid reserves, especially unsaturated and polyunsaturated fatty acids.=

As Mariska's heart rate climbed to its target of one hundred and seventy-nine



beats per minute, her deep and regular breathing and the quiet slap of water against her body brought on her usual swimming trance. For a brief, blue moment doing the right thing was easy: just bounce off the two walls connected by the black lane line.

Then her thoughts began to tumble over one another. Everything was stuck together, just like in the Love Gravy song. Al and Jak and Volochkova and her life on the Moon and her future in space and sex and going deep and the way her room wouldn't let her grow up and Feodor Bear and pancakes and tomatoes and what did Random want with her anyway?

=The gene regulating the enzyme PDK4 (pyruvate dehydrogenase kinase isoenzyme 4) switches the squirrel's metabolism from the active to the hibernating state by inhibiting carbohydrate oxidation.=

She tried to remember exactly when she had decided not to block out everything about Natalya Volochkova, but she couldn't. She had a vague memory that it had been her room's idea. She had asked it why her mother had abandoned her and her room had said that maybe grownups didn't always have choices but that had only made her upset. So her room had told Mariska that she was a special girl who didn't need a mother and that she should never ask about her again. *Ever. Never.* Or had that been in a dreamfeed?

= . . . mitochondrial functions are drastically reduced . . . =

Mariska felt as if she were swimming through the data in the feed. She was certain that she would never remember any of it. And Mr. Holmgren was going to have a meltdown when he saw how she had left her bench in the lab and she'd probably flunk tomatoes just like Jak had.

=In 2014 the first recombinant ground squirrel and human genes resulted in activity of PTL —pancreatic triacylglycerol lipase—in both heart and white adipose tissue under supercooling conditions.=

What had happened in 2018? She had never much cared for history. The Oil Crash must have started around that time. And Google 1.0. The founding of Moonbase Zhong? A bunch of extinctions. Datafeeds, sure, but mindfeeds didn't come until the eighties. When did the fossil spacers launch the first starship?

As she touched the wall a foot tapped her on the shoulder. She twisted out of her flip turn and broke the surface of the water, sputtering. Random was standing at the edge of the pool, staring at her. His bathing suit had slid down his bony hips. "My penny," he said. "Can I have it back now?" His pale skin had a just tinge of blue and he was shivering.

Random spilled his bundle of clothes onto the floor in front of her locker; he had the handle of a lunch box clamped between his teeth. Mariska slithered into her tube top as he set the lunch box on the bench between them. It had a picture of an apple on it; the apple was wearing a space helmet.

"This isn't funny, Random." Mariska slipped an arm into the sleeve of her tugshirt. "Are you stalking me?"

"No." He punched the print button on the processor and an oversized pool towel rolled from the output slot above the lockers. "Not funny at all."

She sealed the front placket of the tug and plunged both hands into its pouch. There it was. She must have taken the penny without realizing it. She extended the coin to him on her palm.

"First we talk, then you get the penny." She closed her fist around it. "What's this about?"

"I said already." Random stripped off his wet bathing suit. "Your mother." He crammed it into the input slot and began to dry himself with the towel.

Mariska set her jaw but didn't correct him. "What about her?"

"She's a fossil. The penny could have been hers."

"Okay." She wasn't sure she believed this, but she didn't want him to think that she didn't know it if it were true. The heroic fossils had been the first humans to go to the stars. They had volunteered to be genetically altered so that they could hibernate through the three-year voyage to the wormhole at the far edge of the Oort Cloud and then hibernate again as their ships cruised at sublight speeds through distant solar systems. Most of the fossils were dead, many from side effects of the crude genetic surgery of the twenty-first century. "So?"

"She probably has stuff. Or maybe you have her stuff?"

"Stuff?"

"To trade." He wrapped the towel around his waist and opened his lunch box. It was crammed with what looked to Mariska like junk wrapped in clear guardgoo. "Like my goods." Random pulled each item out as if it were a treasure.

"Vanilla Girl." He showed her the head of a doll with a patch over one eye. "Pencil," he said. "Never sharpened." He arranged an empty Coke bubble, a paper book with the cover ripped off, a key, a purple eyelight, a pepper shaker in the shape of a robot, and a thumb teaser on the bench. At the bottom of the lunch box was a tiny red plastic purse. He snapped it open and shook it so that she could hear coins clinking. "Please?"

Mariska dropped the penny into the purse. "How did you find out she's a fossil?"

"It's complicated." He tapped his forehead and she felt a tingle as he offered her a feed. "Want to open up?"

"No." Mariska folded her arms over her chest. "I don't think I do." She was chilled at the thought of losing herself in the chaos of feeds everyone claimed was churning inside Random's head. "You'll just have to say it."

Random dropped the towel on the floor and pulled on his janitor's greens. She was disgusted to see that he didn't bother with underwear. "When the *Gorshkov* came back," he said, "everyone was happy." He furrowed his brow, trying to remember how to string consecutive sentences together. "Happy people talk and make feeds and party all over. That's how I know." He nodded as if that explained everything.

Mariska tried not to sound impatient. "Know what?"

"It's a beautiful planet." Random made a circle with his hands, as if to present the new world to her. "Check the feeds, you'll see. It's the best ever. Even better than Earth, at least the way it is now, all crispy and crowded."

"Okay, so it's the Garden of slagging Eden. So what does that have to do with all this crap?"

"Crap?" He drew himself up, and then waved the pepper shaker at her. "My goods aren't crap." He set it carefully back in the lunch box and began to gather up the rest of his odd collection.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry." Mariska didn't want to chase him away—at least not yet. "So it's a beautiful planet. And your goods are great. Tell me what's going on?"

He stacked the Coke bubble and the eyelight on top of the book but then paused, considering her apology. "Most of the crew of the *Gorshkov* are going back." He packed the pile away. "It's their reward, to live on a planet with all that water and all that sky and friendly weather. Going back . . ." he tapped the bench next to her leg ". . . with their families."

Mariska's throat was so tight that she could barely croak. "I'm not her family."

"Okay." He shrugged. "But anything you want to trade before you go—either of you . . ."

Mariska flung herself at the security door.

"Just asking," Random called after her.

When she burst into the kitchen, Al was arranging a layer of lasagna noodles in a casserole. Yet another of her favorite dishes; Mariska should have known something

was wrong. She gasped when he looked over his shoulder at her. His eyes were shiny and his cheeks were wet.

"You *knew*." She could actually hear herself panicking. "She wants to drag me off to some stinking rock twenty light years away and you *knew*."

"I didn't. But I guessed." The weight of his sadness knocked her back onto one of the dining room chairs. "She stopped by right after you left. She's looking for you."

"I'm not here."

"Okay." He picked up a cup of shredded mozzarella and sprinkled it listlessly over the noodles.

"You can't let her do this, Al. You're my daddy. You're supposed to protect me."

"It's a term contract, Mariska. I'm already in the option year."

"Slag the contract. And slag you for signing it. I don't want to go."

"Then don't. I don't think she'll make you. But you need to think about it." He kept his head down and spooned sauce onto the lasagna. "It's space, Mariska. You're a spacer."

"Not yet. I haven't even passed tomatoes. I could wash out. I *will* wash out."

He sniffed and wiped his eyes with his sleeve.

"I don't understand," she said. "Why are you taking her side?"

"Because you're a child and she's your legal parent. Because you can't live here forever." His voice climbed unsteadily to a shout. Al had never shouted at her before. "Because all of this is over." He shook the spoon at their kitchen.

"What do you mean, over?" She thought that it wasn't very professional of him to be showing his feelings like this. "Answer me! And what about Jak?"

"I don't know, Mariska." He jiggled another lasagna noodle out of the colander. "I don't know what I'm going to do."

She stared at his back. The kitchen seemed to warp and twist; all the ties that bound her to Al were coming undone. She scraped her chair from the table and spun down the hall to her room, bouncing off the walls.

"Hello Mariska," said her room as the door slid shut. "You seem upset. Is there anything I can. . . ?"

"Shut up, shut up, *shut up*."

She didn't care if she hurt her room's feelings; it was just a stupid persona anyway. She needed quiet to think, sort through all the lies that had been her life. It must have been some other girl who had drawn funny aliens on the walls or listened to the room tell stories—lies!—about a space captain named Mariska or who had built planets inhabited by unicorns and fairies and princesses in her room's simspace. She didn't belong here. Not in this goddamn room, not on the Moon, not anywhere.

Then it came to her. She knew what she had to do. Only she wasn't sure exactly how to do it. But how hard could going deep be? It was in her genes—her mother's genes. Slag her. Everyone so worried that she would go deep without really meaning to. So that must mean that she could. That's how the fossils had done it, before there were hibernation pods and proper euthermic arousal protocols.

She didn't know what good going deep would do her. It was probably stupid. Something a kid would do. But that was the point, wasn't it? She was just a kid. What other choice did she have?

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She lay back on her bed and thought about space, about stepping out of the airlock without anything on. Naked and alone, just like she had always been. The air would freeze in her lungs and they would burst. Her eyes would freeze and it would be dark. She would be as cold as she had ever been. As cold as Natalya Volochkova, that bitch.

"The earth is up," the room murmured. "And I am always up. Is Mariska ready to get up yet?"

Mariska shivered from the cold. That wasn't right. Her room was supposed to monitor both its temperature and hers.

"The earth is up, and I am always up," cooed her room. It wasn't usually so patient.

Mariska stretched. She felt stiff, as if she had overdone a swim. She opened her eyes and then shut them immediately. Her room had already brought the lights up to full intensity. It was acting strangely this morning. Usually it would interrupt one of her dreams, but all that she had in her head was a vast and frigid darkness. Space without the stars.

Mariska yawned and slitted her eyes against the light. She was facing the shelf where Feodor Bear sat. "*Dobroye utro,*" it said. The antique robot bumped against the shelf twice in a vain attempt to stand. "Good morn-ing Mar-i-ska." There was something wrong with its speech chip; it sounded as if it were talking through a bowl of soup.

"Good morning, dear Mariska," said her room. "Today is Wednesday, November 23, 2163. You have no bookings scheduled for today.

That couldn't be right. The date was way off. Then she remembered.

The door slid open. She blinked several times before she could focus on the woman standing there.

"Mariska?"

Mariska knew that voice. Even though it had a crack to it that her room had never had, she recognized its singing accent.

"Where's Al?" When she sat up the room seemed to spin.

"He doesn't live here anymore." The woman sat beside her on the bed. She had silver hair and a spacer's sallow complexion. Her skin was wrinkled around the eyes and the mouth. "I can send for him, if you like. He's just in Muoi Zone." She seemed to be trying on a smile, to see if it would fit. "It's been three years, Mariska. We couldn't rouse you. It was too dangerous."

She considered this. "Jak?"

"Three years is a long time."

She turned her face to the wall. "The room's voice—that's you. And the persona?"

"I didn't want to go to *Delta Pavonis*, but I didn't have a choice. I'm a spacer, dear, dear Mariska. Just like you. When they need us, we go." She sighed. "I knew you would hate me—I would have hated me. So I found another way to be with you; I spent the two months before we left uploading feeds. I put as much of myself into this room as I could." She gestured at Mariska's room.

"You treated me like a kid. Or the room did."

"I'm sorry. I didn't think I'd be gone this long."

"I'm not going to that place with you."

"All right," she said. "But I'd like to go with you, if you'll let me."

"I'm not going anywhere." Mariska shook her head; she still felt groggy. "Where would I go?"

"To the stars," said Natalya Volochkova. "They've been calling you. *Alpha Centauri*. *Barnard's*. *Wolf*. *Lalande*. *Luyten*. *Sirius*."

Mariska propped herself on a elbow and stared at her. "How do you know that?"

She reached out and brushed a strand of hair from Mariska's forehead. "Because," she said, "I'm your mother." ○

## AND DRUNK THE MILK OF PARADISE

Down in the factory warrens of free Mars  
Where the wars for independence are waged  
With daily flash raids and midnight marauding  
Lowly ice sellers live in seething turmoil

Here and there smart bombs carve dead pockets  
Sudden amputations to key conduits and caves  
Even more insidious are those subtle infidelities  
The nano-driven retouches to reality

Rigging condensers from scrap and salvage  
Juice-jacking off the power grid these vendors  
Remap their peddling routes and push on to supply  
The cold necessities of water for colonial life

The oldest the mama-san of ice mongers  
Spends days within a bright tangle of fiber optics  
And divines the shifting data floes  
For miracles of revolutionary device

By night she sleeps beneath an ammonia haze  
Dreaming of a plain where sweet dustless breezes  
Blow constant as the whine of O<sub>2</sub> expellers and  
Sacred rivers again run through rouge red rock

—Robert Frazier

Photo Credit: NASA/JPL/Cornell

# CONTROLLED EXPERIMENT

Tom Purdom

**The author tells us that “some Philadelphia SF readers have recently formed a Tom Purdom Reading Club, which means they read something I’ve written and then discuss it with me over dinner. I’m not sure how it will turn out, but I feel about the same way Isaac Asimov did when he discovered universities were scheduling courses in The Science Fiction of Isaac Asimov.” After reading the next story, the club may want to join him in a discussion about the perilous lengths a NIMBY protest could take in the not too distant future.**

*It was a perfect launch. Perfect. I slowed the car to five miles an hour. I opened the window. And out went the bird. Right at the moment the screen said we were crossing launch zero. The car didn’t run slow more than twenty seconds.*

**B**ud Weldon’s floppypet had gone berserk while he was eating dinner. First it made two random dashes across the dining room. Then it connected with the shelves that held Bud’s ceramics. The big ceramic elephant he had shaped during his thirty-second year in prison hit the floor along with four other pieces. Bud had stood up yelling orders—incoherent orders, probably, but he said they were orders—and his faithful, never-failing source of affection had zeroed in on him. First at his ankles. Then for his face.

Bud’s pacification implant reacted seconds after he started yelling and his prison reflexes apparently kicked in with it. He picked up a chair. He backed out of the house. He called for help. And now his house was a mess. And his floppypet had a police bullet hole in its processor.

Floppypets were machines but people didn’t think of them that way. Bud had bonded with his just like he was supposed to. It had responded to him in ways no dog or cat could have and he had responded right back. You might know a floppypet was only a collection of circuits and programmed responses, in the same way you might suspect an animal was just offering you a routine that only *looked* like affection, but you did what humans had always done. And let your emotions take over.

Van Levanti understood Bud’s feelings but he didn’t think the police sergeant did. The sergeant was a muscular young guy, probably only a little over forty, almost certainly unmarried. The only cuddly things the sergeant was interested in, Van was confident, were human and female. He’d probably be surprised to learn some of *their* responses didn’t mean what he thought they did.



"You'd think a guy like that would be tougher," the cop said.

"You don't get a lot of affection in prison," Van said.

"Sixty-six years."

"From the time he was twenty-four."

"That's a long time to go without it."

The cop was sitting in his three-wheeler on Bud's lawn. Most of the bystanders were staying on the other side of the street. Van figured the crowd totaled fifty so far. A dozen bolder souls had crossed the street and lodged themselves in front of a barrier patrolled by two police robies. The robies had blocked two boys who had tried to slip through the barrier, but they were still using their female voices.

Van had a picture of Bud's dining room window superimposed on the lower right corner of his visual field. Van's wife was doing her half of the job back at their house and she had turned her attention to the information recorded on Bud's security system. She had found what she was looking for as soon as she zeroed in on the five minutes just before the floppypet went psycho. She ordered a rerun of the recording and Van watched a bird dart into the scene and scratch at the window with its wings flapping like overcharged machines.

"That's got to be it," Rosa said. "A virus like that had to be transmitted close range. You can transmit it long range if you've got a really powerful transmitter but close range with an organic carrier fits the pattern better. Tell the sergeant he should look for a dead bird. I checked the species and the energy requirements. If we assume the bird came in from outside the development, a rig like that would probably die before it got half a mile from its delivery point. I'm looking at a search zone for the road, too."

Van kept the connection open so Rosa could hear him talking to the sergeant. He had connected with Rosa as soon as they heard about Bud's problem. They would probably stay connected for the next few hours. They only connected, normally, when they had something, to share but a situation like this obviously called for a deviation from their standard arrangements.

Van knew couples who stayed connected round the clock but he and Rosa had decided that was a bad idea two hours after they had acquired their first communication implants. He had never met a constantly connected couple who had been married seventy-three years. He didn't think he ever would.

The sergeant shook his head. "You want me to make that kind of effort over this?"

Van wasn't surprised. It was the way most cops reacted to mischief incidents. Mischief geeks counted on it. They could drive somebody crazy for months knowing nobody in the power structure would listen to the victim's pleas. It was only mischief. It wasn't something *serious*.

"It happened to Bud," Van said.

"We're supposed to treat him the same way we'd treat anybody else. What do we do if we find the bird? Scan it for fingerprints?"

"I'll hire somebody to do it," Rosa said. "The budget can take it."

The caseworker had arrived while Van had been talking to the sergeant. Bud was sitting on a chair somebody had brought out of the house and the caseworker was standing in front of him. Van blipped her a connection request and the caseworker let him listen in while she asked Bud all the standard questions.

Bud still wasn't convinced the cops had to shoot his pet. He brought the subject up every time he answered a question and the caseworker let him run on. Van noted that she didn't try to comfort Bud by reminding him the floppypet had a complete memory backup in storage. Rosa had tried the equivalent of that approach when their daughter's cat had died many years ago. We'll get you another one, Rosa had said in her rational way. Van had realized that was a blunder as soon as Rosa said it.

Bud claimed he felt fine and Van had to admit he looked like he always did—a big, soft guy with a round open face, a bland ambling type who would never launch a blow at anyone, much less kill a cop. He just needed to straighten things up, Bud told the caseworker. He just needed help straightening things up.

"I've contracted a search tech," Rosa said. "He'll be there in twenty minutes with three birds. I told him to report directly to you."

*I rode around for three hours after the launch and I didn't log in once. I watched the news, I even made myself watch a movie. If anybody ever checked the car's black box, the only unusual thing on it would be that little multi-second slow down.*

*I didn't look at the reaction until I was sitting in my own bedroom. And then I just browsed. I didn't need to say anything. They were discussing the Bud Experiment on fifty different sites by then. My little escapade was Topic Number One on every one of them.*

The caseworker felt Bud was staying calm because of the pacifier. Underneath it, he was seething with rage.

"I've arranged for a cleaning crew," the caseworker said. "That's standard practice. There's no special treatment involved. We should get Bud inside as soon as they get the place straightened up. We should keep him there until he's had time to settle down."

Bud had his own opinion. He had been taking a bicycle ride every evening after dinner and he didn't want to miss it. The exercise would actually make him feel better, in his opinion.

They had connected with the psychiatrist the state Board of Prisons had assigned to the project and the psychiatrist supported the caseworker. "You shouldn't let yourself be misled by Bud's outward affect," the psychiatrist said. "It isn't just the pacifier. You could talk to him for days in normal social settings and never see a trace of the emotions he's containing."

The chatterheads were already having their say, too, as always. Van had added a sample monitor to his display while he was talking to the sergeant and the program was feeding him statistics and sample quotes. The Bud Experiment had attracted over three hundred thousand commentators at last count, with 38 percent pro, 41 percent violently anti.

*We're all supposed to sink into depression just because poor Buddy lost his cuddle machine?*

*Officer Roskovich died. A seven-year-old kid died. That's all there is to it. There isn't anything else.*

Most of the antis, as usual, underlined their vehemence by appending pictures of Mark Allen and Mary Roskovich—the kid Bud had killed when he had played his own little prank and the police officer he had stabbed with a kitchen knife when he had assaulted the cops who had visited his apartment. And what anti could resist crowing over the justice of it? Hadn't sweet old Bud been a mischief himself?

*Do we have to remind all you forgiveness addicts his idea of fun was a wee bit nastier than a machine that broke a few dishes? The wasps Buddy put together in his little biohack lab weren't some kind of Halloween trick.*

To which the pros answered with the same catalog their side always used. Bud's wasps were only supposed to kill a dog. Bud hadn't known the woman who snubbed him on the river bicycle path had a kid who visited her every two weeks. Bud couldn't have known the kid liked to sleep in the patio in October. He didn't know Mark was going to pet the dog when he designed the wasps so they would zero in on dog scent. It had been an accident, unintended homicide. Etc. Etc.

Van had seen a thousand changes in his lifetime, but one thing seemed to remain constant. People had an infinite capacity for repeating the same arguments over and over.

*You don't keep people in prison for hundreds of years for an unintended homicide. He killed a cop.*

*Anybody could have lost control in that situation.*

*He's a creep who got mad at a woman who snubbed him.*

*He spent sixty-six years in prison. How long are we supposed to keep him there?*

*Let him spend a thousand.*

*Let him die.*

Van marked the cyclist in the red jacket sixteen minutes after he and Rosa started following Bud down the bike path. Van and Rosa were staying twenty-five yards behind Bud and the red jacket had settled in a hundred yards behind them. It wasn't the color Van would have chosen if he had been planning to shadow someone but the red jacket was maintaining the position as if they were all rolling down the pavement in formation.

Rosa was monitoring the search tech as she pedaled. The search tech had released his birds ten minutes after he had arrived on the scene. He and Van had slipped into the shrubbery corner in Bud's back yard and the tech had plotted a low-level search pattern that would carry his birds over the yards and fences within half a mile of Bud's dining room window. The cops would have needed a search warrant for something like that. A private busybody just did it.

The bike path was part of a bike and cartway network that ran through the entire development. In another year, three thousand "higher income" people would be living here in well-maintained isolation, eighty-two miles from the nearest metropolitan center, with a state park for their northern border and a single road to their south. The people who were living here now were enjoying a level of luxury most of them would never experience again.

Van still had trouble believing several million adults could make their living guinea pigging in sociological simulations. Rosa claimed it was the kind of thing people should have expected, but he still shook his head when he thought of it. Rosa's first Ph.D. had been a degree in economics and she could roll out the figures. Only 5 percent of the population now worked in agriculture and manufacturing—in jobs where you actually produced something you could hold in your hand. That was all it took to produce every man-made thing he could see around them. Everybody else worked at something else. And most of them were doing things nobody had ever thought of. It had been going on ever since the industrial revolution had hit the textile industry in eighteenth century England, Rosa had told him at least once a year over the course of their marriage. And somehow we keep coming up with new kinds of work.

Every person he saw around him, on a bicycle, on a bench, stepping into a restaurant, was living here at the expense of the state government, on salary, just so they could react to Bud's presence. What did you do with prisoners like Bud when a life sentence without parole could mean they could still be sitting in their cells two hundred years after they were sentenced? Or a thousand, the way things were going? How would the populace react? Would people really accept all the testimonies the psychiatrists signed? And the safeguards they claimed they had embedded?

Van slipped into alert mode as soon as he saw the two cyclists coming up on his left. He zoomed in on them with the rear view camera built into his helmet and resisted the urge to relax when he noted they were a couple. They whipped past him like a pair of standard issue maximum-exercise types, heads low, legs working like pistons.

They stopped acting like stereotypes when they rolled even with Bud. The man gave Bud a mocking little wave. The woman said something Van couldn't make out. They shifted to the right, directly in front of Bud, and slowed to a crawl.

Van speeded up. Bud tried to go around the couple and they shifted left and blocked his way. The woman looked back and laughed.

"You need to slow down, granddad. You're going to strain yourself."

Van pulled up beside Bud. A quick scan verified that Bud's cheeks were tinged with pink. His back had acquired a noticeable droop. The caseworker and the psychiatrist had made the right call. The pink tinge and the handdog slouch were clear signs Bud's pacification implant had been activated—and that only happened when Bud was becoming dangerous. The implant was the last defense against the homicidal rage that had overwhelmed Bud's self-control, all those decades ago, when the police had told him he was facing a murder charge.

It was one of those moments when Van could have used a little help dealing with his feelings about the bureaucrats who had written his job description. In theory, he and Rosa were supposed to let things happen. That was the whole point of the experiment, after all. On the other hand, the "responsible officials" were well aware "certain outcomes" could have a serious effect on their job security. His immediate supervisors would not be at all happy, for example, if the experiment had to be terminated because someone had killed the principal subject. Or vice versa.

The woman's use of the word "granddad" indicated this might mostly be an age thing. There were a lot of young people who were beginning to realize their elders were going to be dominating the scene for as far ahead as anyone could see. If that was all it was . . . if it was just impulsive harassment. . . .

"Behind me," Rosa said. "On my left."

Van activated his helmet camera and saw the red jacket charging past Rosa like a racer making a break from the rear. The rider had even lowered the kind of plastic windscreen racers fitted over their faces so they could gain that extra bit of streamlining that cut another millisecond off their time.

He had about three seconds to react, at the speed the rider was going, but it wouldn't have mattered if he had been given three hours. He didn't have any firm evidence they were being attacked until he saw the oncoming hotshot stop pedaling and straighten up.

He caught a brief glimpse of a wide-eyed face gaping at him through the windscreen. A red jacketed arm stretched across his chest. A spray of orange mist shot toward Bud. A thin orange cloud surrounded Bud's face.

Bud let out a yell. His bicycle lurched forward. He crashed into the female harasser and grabbed at her clothes as the two bicycles tilted over.

Van swerved to the left, to avoid hitting the pileup. He squeezed his brake levers as if he was trying to wring the water out of the metal and let his bike clatter to the pavement between his legs. The rider in the red jacket was standing up on the pedals and bouncing across the grass beside the bike path.

Bud had broken his own fall by putting his foot down. He was swinging his arms toward the back of the woman bicyclist's skull with his big hands locked into a club. His bland Bud face had been replaced by a red mask that looked like it had been etched into his skin by all the bile he had accumulated over sixty-six years of confinement.

Van twisted out of his bicycle frame. Bud was six-two, Van was five-eight, and Bud had sixty pounds of bulk on him. But Van had been grunting and heaving one hour a day, four days a week, since he had turned fifty. His shoulder slammed into a soft stomach and the two of them stumbled away from the bike pileup in exactly the way Van had assumed they would when he had sized Bud up before he accepted the job.

He hopped back and fell into an unarmed on guard position. He had seen that kind of mask before. You couldn't stop somebody in that condition with a few blocks. You couldn't even assume a broken leg would stop them. The spray that had enveloped Bud's head had obviously neutralized the pacifier and uncaged all the demons the pacifier had been restraining.

Bud's face changed. His shoulders slumped. The pacifier chemical kicked in again and the bright red faded to the pink induced by the chemical's side effects.

Rosa stopped her bike on Van's right. She gave Van a quick appraisal and turned her attention to the mess behind his back.

"I'm calling an ambulance," Rosa said. "You'd better get Bud out of here."

Van checked out the scene in his rear view camera. Bud's swing had apparently connected. The woman was sprawled over her bicycle on her hands and knees. Her boyfriend was crouching beside her with his eyes fixed on Bud.

Four bikers had already pulled up behind Rosa. More people were hurrying toward them from the benches along the bikeway.

*I realized I was being used as soon as I heard about it, of course. It's one of the risks you run when you become a mischief. You get some good escapades behind you and people offer you money and really good gear. Mostly it's the gear. And the chance to do something you could never do on your own. So I can't make excuses. I went into it knowing I was joining forces with people who had their own program. But I didn't know they were that serious. My escapade was just a setup as far as they were concerned. Just something to build up a lot of pressure in Bud's head. So he'd be all primed when they sprayed him with the antidote to the pacification molecule. He could have killed that woman.*

The governor's point man for the Bud Experiment was a wispy close-to-the-chest political operator named Jerry Steinman. He had been given the job, Van had decided, because there was no danger he would forget that the governor's political career merited a higher priority than the results of the experiment. The governor had been willing to give the experiment a try. He would look very good if it worked. It would save the taxpayers a mountain of money. The governor would add a little more weight to his image as the kind of leader who was willing to try new things. But he could also show people he was the kind of leader who could drop an experiment that didn't work.

"You're bucking a very strong negative," Steinman said.

They had all looked at the stuff on the chatter screens. The antis were hammering at the obvious argument—an argument that was as old as the first years of the digital era.

*You can't change the facts. Whatever you do, somebody will get to him eventually.*

*It's only been a month. Thirty-three days. And look what they've done.*

*What happens if there's nobody there to stop him? Are we supposed to pay for a permanent bodyguard?*

"They attack him," Rosa said. "And then they use the attack to prove the experiment won't work."

Van and Rosa were stretched out in deck chairs in the back yard of the house they had been assigned. They had arranged the house camera system so Steinman could only see their faces and they could feel free to hold hands—a habit that seemed to fascinate younger people who knew they had been married over seven decades.

"We can't be dealing with a typical mischief," Van said. "They had an antidote for the pacification drug. They know what the pacification drug is. And they've got the ability to create an antidote."

"I did a search," Rosa said. "There's almost no information on pacification molecules in the mischief networks."

"It's not the kind of thing mischiefs do," Van said. "Bud could have killed that woman if I hadn't pushed him away from her. Have you considered the possibility someone might be trying to get at your boss?"

"I'm planning to look into it."

"It seems to me that would undermine a lot of the anti argument if it turned out to be true."

"It could."

The search tech had found the dead bird and collected it with a big owl he used when his flock had to pick something up. The dead bird had been lying on a front lawn, in plain sight of two floors of windows, but nobody seemed to notice the pickup. In spite of all the uproar in the electronic section of reality, most of the people in the development seemed to be concentrating on the kind of things people normally did. For every person who was all hyped up about Bud's activities, there were probably fifteen who were playing games, watching videos, and indulging in the traditional biological pleasures.

Rosa had passed the dead bird to a bird geek who was examining its arrangements to see if he could help them locate its creator. Bird geeks, like bomb makers, tended to have signature techniques that could be used to identify them.

The two bicyclists who had triggered the incident seemed to be innocent. "We were just playing around," the man claimed. "We would have speeded up in another minute."

The man had already appeared on two news sites. His partner was lying in a hospital room thirty miles from the development and he wasn't paying any attention to people who told him she was just there for observation.

"They told us they had that guy under control. I saw what he looked like. He was all set to kill somebody—just like he killed that cop seventy years ago. He hasn't changed. He's still a killer."

Van and Rosa had two grown children and they had responded in their standard, predictable fashion when Rosa had passed them a summary with links and attachments. Jessica had given the package a thorough, systematic study, even though she was currently based in Stockholm, working on an analysis of the drop in homicide rates and surrounded by distractions that ranged from ski treks to box seats at the ballet. Wally was maintaining the information system on a research ship that was transiting the remains of the Argentine fishing grounds, with lots of empty time on his schedule, so he had obviously settled for a quick skim and ignored most of the links and attachments.

Wally kept the camera focused on his head and shoulders, but Van could tell he was lounging on his bunk—probably with a beer can somewhere in reach. For Wally, it was an open and shut case. "The antis have it. Whatever you do, the mischiefs are going to get to him. It's the way it's always been. You've got thousands of people out there looking for some way to break through any kind of security you set up."

"So we're living in a world where the lawbreakers get to make the rules," Rosa said.

Wally smiled. "That's about it, Mom."

Jessica was sitting at a table drinking her morning coffee. She was fully dressed, complete with dangling earrings, and ready to start her day's work.

"I wouldn't classify it as quite that hopeless," Jessica said. "The poll numbers aren't that bad. You still have a majority with you. I recommend that you concentrate on identifying the troublemakers. Identify and prosecute. Show people you can



make the perpetrators sorry they did it. Assure the majority you can punish, even if you can't prevent."

Van nodded. He had been afraid Jessica would be just as negative as Wally. *I can understand why this makes sense*, Jessica had said when he and Rosa had taken the job. *But I have to tell you, I wouldn't mind if they kept that bug locked up for another century. He killed a kid. He killed a woman who was just doing her job. Who cares what happens to him?*

Jessica had become interested in political analysis when she had read Machiavelli in her fifteenth year. She had become a specialist in the study of violent behavior and her contacts with the people who engaged in that behavior hadn't softened the hardnosed assessment of human relations that had attracted her to Machiavelli.

The centenarians caged in the state's prisons included mass murderers and serial rapists. The selection committee had picked Bud because he had seemed like one of the less controversial prospects. He would have been paroled years ago if he hadn't killed a police officer.

"So what if you do nab this mischief character?" Wally said. "There's a thousand other guys out there just like him."

"The critical factor is public opinion," Jessica said. "People may be willing to accept the risk if they know you can catch the perpetrators. You shouldn't underestimate the deterrent factor either. Mischiefs tend to avoid activities that can get them into serious trouble. Their whole lifestyle is based on the fact that mischiefs rarely encounter serious legal problems."

Wally offered his sister the same tolerant smile he had bestowed on his mother. "It's in the literature, right?"

Jessica winked. She and her brother had been kidding each other about their differences since they had been preteens. It was one of the little blessings that made their parents feel they had done something right.

"It is indeed, my good brother."

*I had nothing against this Bud joker. He shouldn't have been playing around with the kind of hyper-dangerous gear he was working with when he got into trouble, but he hadn't done it to kill the kid. You don't have to be a head doctor to know he killed that cop because they triggered off years of deep-filed rage. That and he saw his whole life blowing up in his face. He should have been treated. He would have been treated if the victim had been a civilian.*

*And what about me? Suppose Bud had killed that bicyclist? Because of something I set in motion? This was not a good association. It didn't matter what they were willing to give me. This was not a true mischief escapade. These people were taking the whole business way too seriously.*

The geek who had constructed the bird lived in a low-energy apartment complex that had grown up around a shopping mall in the Detroit area. The geek Rosa had hired recognized the style as soon as he finished deconstructing the bird—a job that took him about six hours. He claimed he could have given her an identity when he was halfway through the job but he liked to be sure.

The alleged malefactor opened up as soon as Van contacted him. He had merely installed a device in one of his standard models, he claimed. He did that for people all the time.

It was a transparently silly statement, of course. You couldn't do what he did without knowing the difference between a device that transmitted and a device that merely received. But he also knew he could cover himself with a minimum of effort.

"Nobody ever prosecutes these guys," Rosa had said. "They're a useful source of in-

formation. They always tell the cops everything they know if the cops manage to trace them."

Van wasn't a cop but the bird geek didn't seem to think the distinction mattered. The geek had even made sure he had something to offer if anybody started questioning him. His customer had arranged a late night transfer in a craft bazaar parking lot and the bird geek had followed the customer's instructions. He had stopped at the specified place, at the specified time, and exchanged the box with the bird for a box with his specified payment. But he had also released one of his black-feathered, long distance camera carriers when he was a mile from the transfer point. He could give Van an overhead video of the customer and the license number of the customer's car.

The customer hadn't rented the car himself, of course. He had been sharing the car with a go-between—an unemployed woman who supplemented her income with the contacts she attracted sitting in the local bars. She was just as cooperative as the bird geek once Rosa got her located and Van connected with her and negotiated a fee.

"Just tell us anything you can remember about him," Van said.

"He said his name was Kirk. That's all I got in that department."

"Did he give you any kind of cover story? Why he was doing this?"

"He said he did favors for friends."

"That's it? Favors for friends?"

"Like it was something mysterious. You know."

"Like it was a big deal?"

"Right."

"Did he have any identifying marks? Tattoos? Physical characteristics?"

"I think he'd done something to his face. To make himself look tanned."

"For disguise?"

"Maybe. He didn't look like the type that would spend a lot of time outdoors."

"Can you tell me something about his height? Body type?"

"He was one of those skinny hunched over types. Stiff. You could tell he didn't spend a lot of time doing physical things."

"Did he tell you anything about himself? Work? Where he was from?"

"He didn't talk much."

"So I gather."

"He was very cautious. You could tell he was nervous."

"But you did know he was picking up a bird?"

"It was in a cage. It was only open on one side. But you didn't have to knock yourself out to see it."

"Did he say anything about it?"

"He said it was for hunting. He put it in the back seat and told me he got it for hunting."

"For hunting?"

"To find animals. For some kind of hunting. So he can shoot arrows at them."

"Bow hunting?"

"With those things that look like guns."

"Crossbows?"

"Right."

Van frowned. "Did he say anything more about that?"

"He said he was a good shot—a *very* good shot. Just like that. I'm a good shot—a *very* good shot."

"Like he had to impress you?"

"Right."

"Did he say anything else? What kind of animals? Where?"

"That was pretty much the last thing he said. 'A good shot—a *very* good shot.'"

"Like he decided he was talking too much."

"Probably."

She had left "Kirk" at a mall parking lot. There was a hotel in the mall they could check out. A skinny man with a birdcage might mean something if he had given the clerk on duty any reason to notice him. But the odds were he hadn't. Given the mischief's overall caution, he had probably slipped in and out without a single interaction with another human being. And checked out of the hotel long before he picked up the bird.

The crossbow thing looked more interesting. Rosa had started working on it before Van finished the interview.

"You got two bits of information," Rosa said, "and they both fit the profile. First he had to give her the impression he was doing something special. Then he couldn't resist telling her he was a good shot. He may be older than the norm but it apparently hasn't affected his behavior."

There were, it seemed, about a million and a quarter crossbow enthusiasts in the United States—an estimate the National Association of Target Sports based on sales figures, memberships, and participation in organized tournaments. The number had peaked about thirty years ago and fluctuated with the changes in population that had occurred since then. Crossbow shooting seemed to appeal to people who wanted to shoot at things but didn't want to go through the legal hassles associated with firearms. It also attracted medieval romantics, military history fans, and its share of the legions of people who drifted from hobby to hobby. A small percentage did, indeed, train their sights on various kinds of animals and birds during the prescribed hunting seasons.

"It doesn't sound like the kind of story you would make up out of nothing," Van said. "Regular bow hunting maybe. But you probably wouldn't think of crossbows unless you had some real contact with them."

Jessica had given them the standard profile for mischiefs. Jessica usually specialized in murderers and rapists but she had worked on a study of mischiefs during an outbreak that had threatened the Tanzanian tourist industry. The typical mischief was a fifteen- to twenty-year-old male, unathletic, above average intelligence, with an "avid interest" in new technologies, simulated-violence games, and various kinds of role playing, including historical reenactments. Twenty-eight percent were women and they tended to be older. Both sexes were socially inhibited and easily scared off, with a strong need to brag about their "escapades"—a need that created exploitable conflicts with their fear of exposure.

"If you do get him identified," Jessica had said, "you'll find a full description of his activities hidden in his files. You can consider that a certainty."

So they were looking for a skinny tallish male, fifteen to twenty, probably two or three years older in this case, who went in for action games and new gadgets, probably didn't have a female friend of any importance, and *might* have some interest in crossbows. Which narrowed the possibilities, Van figured, to a mob that would keep all the detectives in America checking out suspects for the next couple of decades.

"It's not *quite* as bad as it looks," Rosa comforted him. "With the decline in the birth rate over the last three decades, the number of males in that age range is down to about five million. The number over six feet two is about forty percent of that, and I think that's a good height to work with, judging by the video and taking into account the minimum height that would look tall to our witness. If the crossbow reference is a valid lead, we can probably narrow the list to about twenty thousand, as-

suming the age cohort we're looking for is proportionately represented in the crossbow community."

"Personally, I'd think they'd be under-represented," Van said. "It doesn't sound like the kind of thing I would have gotten excited about at that age. Have you got a statistic?"

"Hold on . . . 3 percent. You're right."

"So, my good wife, we have now narrowed our search to fifteen thousand suspects. Assuming the crossbow doesn't attract a disproportionate number of male adolescents over six feet two."

"And assuming the crossbow lead is valid."

"I think you should go with it."

"So do I."

*So that was it. I was out. I'm a mischief, not a terrorist. I know when to stop. I know where the line is.*

*I would have stopped, too. It was settled. I like being a mischief but it's not some kind of addiction. I can walk away from it when I have to. I dropped the whole game for three full years. And I could drop it again.*

There had been a time when Van, like most young men, had wondered if he really could live with one person for the rest of his life. Rosa had felt the same way, though he hadn't realized it until she had mentioned it one night just before their eleventh anniversary.

A friend of his had given him a warning a few days before the weekend he and Rosa got married. On Tuesday, the friend had assured him, you're going to look around and see a world full of incredibly attractive women. And wonder what you've done.

It had been one of the best pieces of advice Van had ever received. Because it had happened. Over lunch in a sidewalk cafe in Oslo. And he had smiled and shrugged it off, forewarned it was a normal reaction.

They had even taken a twelve month break in their forty-first year together. They had emerged from their first full rollover with every organ in their bodies tweaked and rehabbed. So why not see just how new they really were?

Van had stuck it out for the agreed-upon year but he had been ready to go home before he'd partied through six months. He and Rosa had been growing together for four decades. They had raised two children, battled with career changes and economic storms, shared friends, parties, calamities. They had formed bonds that were so basic they didn't know they were there until they felt the wrench when they tried to separate.

His worries about sex had been just as silly as the other stuff he had fretted about. You were always told variety was stimulating. His own youthful adventures had convinced him that was true. But the associations that attached themselves to a particular face and body could become even more galvanizing.

Still, in spite of all the things they had in common, he was constantly fascinated by the differences in their personalities. She was the rational desk-oriented type, he was the people-oriented field worker. He had started out as a manager, riding herd on the geeks in three different industries, and she had put in thirty years as a brokerage house macro-economist. He had switched to temporary troubleshooting when full time jobs dried up and she had become a freelance general researcher when she found she couldn't compete with the young gunslingers in her original profession. He had talked her into trying their present ill-defined assignment largely because it felt like the right way to jump. She had agreed to go along with it mostly because he had promised her he would handle the people stuff.

"We'll make a perfect team," Van had insisted. "Outside and Inside. It's just what they need."

Rosa was not, however, a neurotic introvert. She liked to party and hang around with people more than Van did. She just didn't like *working* with people. When she was working, she just wanted to sit in a quiet place all by herself and manipulate numbers and circuits.

There was one big exception to her aversion to workplace contacts. Rosa had discovered she could work with the human networks that monitored the eworld. They were one of the most important tools a researcher could pick up, and they attracted people who preferred relationships that were limited to electronic exchanges.

Mischiefs, like everyone else, had their online communities. Escapades were chronicled in anonymous safety. Tips were exchanged. Ethical issues debated. And some of the people who hung around the mischief sites made their living collecting information on behalf of employers who catered to the whims of the information market.

As with all search systems, a lot depended on the searcher's ability to frame the right questions. "We'll start with the mischief networks," Rosa decided. "We could look for a crossbow enthusiast who's hinted that he's a mischief but I suspect we'll have better luck looking for a mischief who's indicated he's a crossbow sharpshooter."

Rosa had built up permanent relationships with three search companies. One of them specialized in big national and international surveys. The other two had spun webs that spanned thousands of microcommunities. They both advised her they had sources in the mischief community, so Rosa followed her personal preferences and opted for the account executive she liked best.

"She's a real all-business, no-nonsense type," Rosa said. "They both know their trade, but Harriet doesn't waste time on chitchat."

*Nobody knows who you are when you work alone. You just have to maintain your own personal security. But everything changes when you start working with other people. Somebody knows your identity.*

*I knew that was an issue when I decided to take their offer. I knew I was giving in to temptation. But I figured it worked both ways. They knew who I was but I knew who they were.*

*I knew they had lawyers. And PR hacks. And buddies in important, influential nodes. But I didn't think it through. They held out the money and the gear and I went for it. I figured they knew I could unmask them anytime they unmasked me. I thought we were equals.*

"What else are you doing?" Steinman said.

It was about the response Van had expected. Van had described the crossbow lead and Steinman had listened with his usual uninformative intentness. He hadn't even grunted.

"She's doing what the police do," Van said, "She's looking at his *modus operandi*. A lot of mischief incidents never make it into the police records but some of them get into the media. She tried several possibilities. Floppypet malfunctions. Viruses delivered by birds. Viruses delivered by animals. Virus attacks followed by second attacks. Viruses delivered by birds and animals produced three positives she's passed on to the search agency she's using."

"Three out of how many?"

"She got sixty-six positives altogether. She liked these three because she felt they had some other similarities. One of them included two attacks on floppypets. The other two it was more intuitive—the kind of pattern she finds it hard to explain."

"What about the spray gun marksman on the bike?"

"The surveillance cameras lost him after he ditched the bike."

"And there's no indication he left the community. He's either a resident or somebody smuggled him in and out."

"I just had a glimpse of his face," Van said. "I'm not even sure he really was a he. I'm pretty sure it was a young face. But it could have been a young woman."

"The governor said to tell you he watched the replay from the bike path cameras," Steinman said. "He thinks you handled the situation as well as anyone could have."

"Thanks," Van said. "Tell him I appreciate that. Have you found any evidence we're dealing with a plot to undermine him?"

"The consensus here is that you should bear down hard on your end. Find the mischief. Then we'll decide what we want to do next."

Van wasn't supposed to be a full time bodyguard but he had decided he should post himself in Bud's house for a while. Some of the chatterheads were arguing the local residents "had a duty" to hang around the street and keep an eye on Bud.

*We've already had one near miss. What's going to happen if Mr. Van Levanti feels a little sleepy the next time somebody gives Bud a whiff of murder gas?*

*It seems to me they've already admitted their little "humane experiment" is a total failure. Buddy boy was supposed to live in the community all by himself, if I understood the original sales pitch correctly.*

Bud had deposited himself in the main recliner in the living room and become engrossed in whatever he was watching on his display. A king-size set of earphones isolated him from his surroundings. He had gotten used to the earphones in prison, Bud said. You couldn't escape from the noise even when you didn't have cellmates.

So far the area outside the house seemed reasonably quiet. Two young swagger-boy types had hung around the other side of the street for a couple of hours. The number of carts and bicycles rolling past the house probably exceeded the norm by three or four times, but that wasn't saying much when the norm was only one or two every few minutes.

Right now Van could see half a dozen people clustering under a pair of trees on the extreme left of the area he could watch from the front windows. Adults of indeterminate age and background, as a real cop might report it. So far there was no indication he had to worry about mobs armed with pitchforks and flaming torches. But the reports from the observers loitering in the public spaces indicated Bud had finally become the main subject of conversation.

*I'm hearing a lot of talk from people who think the project should be terminated, one of the real-world lurkers had reported. It's the same kind of thing you're hearing in the eworld—he's a bigger danger than the hiring agency claimed, there's no way anybody can guarantee he won't be attacked the same way again and hurt somebody else.*

The guinea pigs had all been guaranteed a one-year residency in the development, with salary. If the state terminated the Bud Experiment, it could rent the setup to one of the organizations that had already paid to be listed as possible alternates.

The twelve-month guarantee was supposed to eliminate a major bias. The "sample participants" knew they would have a job even if their employers terminated the experiment.

In practice, the employment bias was one more subject the professional analysts could use to see *they* stayed employed. Most of their studies indicated the participants reacted to events without worrying about their job security. Other studies, conducted with greater depth according to their authors, indicated there was a residual effect which had to be discounted by some unknown factor. Both sides agreed more studies were needed.



Van had come to a slightly different conclusion. On all matters of public policy, the politicians made the only assessments that counted. Their techniques tended to be crude and unmathematical but they had a solid, objective basis for evaluating the results. The politicians who made the right judgments got to stay in office.

One of the "intuitive" possibilities on Rosa's list involved three attacks that had taken place over a two-year period just over three years ago. One of the attacks had included a berserk floppypet. Two had been committed with birds. The common thread, in Rosa's opinion, was an assault that involved something that had a lot of emotional value to the victims. In addition to the assault on the floppypet, the mischief had turned the fruit of a thirty-year-old apple tree into a mild psychedelic and infected a front yard garden with a virus that altered the colors of all the flowers. The attacks on the garden and the apple tree had both generated news stories that indicated the two items had a special meaning to their owners. The gardener had even offered a reward to anyone who could identify the vandal.

The locations of the three incidents formed a triangle centered on Bridgeport, Connecticut. There were no crossbow clubs in Bridgeport, but Rosa decided to check the membership lists of clubs in New Haven, Hartford, and the New York metropolitan area.

"The guy our witness chauffeured could have been just about the right age three years ago," Rosa said. "Judging by her description. And the images we have."

Van frowned. She would have to buy the membership lists, in the same way marketers did. "That could get expensive. Do we have any figures on the probability a mischief will drop out for three years and start up again?"

"I asked Jessica about that. She says it's a tossup. The number of known mischiefs who keep it up past twenty is too small to make any kind of generalization. Some quit and come back, some never stop."

"And, of course, if this really is part of a plot against the governor, somebody could have offered him money. . . ."

"Our daughter the crime queen says paid work violates the ethics of the mischief community. They're supposed to torment people just for the sake of doing it. But she doesn't think you can rule out an elder statesman yielding to temptation and turning mercenary."

"What are you doing with the other two possibilities? What are they doing to our expense account?"

"This is the only one that gives me something solid to work with like the location. I'm still looking for a handle on the other two."

As it turned out, the list check didn't cost that much. The agency she was using merely asked for the names of members who lived within ten miles of Bridgeport. With some of the customary data on sex, age, etc.

Twenty-three names landed on Rosa's display. Fourteen, interestingly, were women—a higher percentage than she and Van would have expected, even in this enlightened age. Six of the men were too old, one had just reached his twelfth birthday.

"Curt Damil," Rosa reported. "Twenty-four. Occupation—crossbow instructor. Started playing with the things three years ago. Won two tournaments in his first fifteen months. The other guy's the right age but the pictures on his site indicate he's at least thirty pounds overweight. And he just lists crossbow shooting among his interests."

"And Curt sounds a lot like Kirk."

"That did pass through my head, husband."

Van connected with their witness and she accepted another payment and studied the pictures and videos on Curt Damil's site.

"My guy didn't have a mustache."

Van copied the main picture on the site and eliminated the mustache. "How's that?"

"That was a pretty thick mustache. Would a guy shave something like that off after he'd gone to all the trouble of growing it?"

"I've known guys who can grow a mustache like that in three or four days. Does this look like him?"

"It could be. If you added the glasses. And darkened the skin."

Van focused his own display on the woman's face before he transmitted a new revised picture. A flicker of emotion crossed her face as soon as she saw it.

"It's what I said. It could be."

"What makes you think it isn't him?"

"It could be him. That's all I can tell you. It could be him."

*They had it all worked out. They were already laying the groundwork.*

*I understood the theory. Make something real big happen and it would be the only thing people would remember. It wouldn't matter who had done it, the pros or the antis. Make it big enough and people would have just one response. That's what happens when you try stuff like the Bud Experiment. You're just going to get trouble. The whole project would end right then and there. And nobody would be interested in who caused the uproar.*

The search agency posted a request for advice on crossbow instructors on the appropriate sites. *I'd like somebody close to New Haven. But I want somebody really good. I just started and I want to get off to a good start.*

Travel records were another possibility. Somewhere there had to be a record that proved Curt Damil had rented a car or boarded a plane when he traveled to Cleveland to pick up the bird. Or a hotel record if he had stayed in a hotel.

"Of course, the mischief we're looking for could really be sitting on a beach in California," Rosa said. "If he hadn't made that slip about the crossbow—if it was a slip. . . ."

"It's the best lead you've got," Van said. "We may as well follow it up."

"And it's the kind of thing mischiefs do. It's a basic psychological conflict. They're deathly afraid of being found out and they want people to know how clever they are."

"So they resolve the conflict by bragging about something else...."

*I hated turning down all the money they were offering. They weren't being cheap. But I did it. I was through. It was over.*

*Then they told me Van Levanti had talked to the woman who'd rented the car for me. They've got your name, they said. They showed her your picture.*

*They showed me her recording of the interview. She recognized you, they said. She covered it up but you can see that flash crossing her face. He saw it, too. He can validate it when he looks at that section of his recording, still by still.*

*They blamed it all on me, of course. I shouldn't have made that remark about the crossbow.*

*I tried to shrug it off. It was a weak link. It wouldn't stand up in court. But I knew that was just talk. That's only the start, they said. They've got feelers out all over the place—all over that little community of yours. They want you. They aren't going to give up until they've got what they're looking for.*

*There's only one way you can protect yourself, they said. Nobody will come after you if we get the project terminated.*

*They had it all wrapped up in one big package. I would get a pile of money, I'd finish my mischief career with a legend, and I'd be sitting at home safe and secure as soon as the governor and his operators realized they had to shut their daydream down.*

*I started to tell them anybody who got me got them. I should have. But it sounded too much like a threat—like I was claiming I would turn them in. But they could figure that out themselves, right? We were in this together.*

*So what could I say when they told me what they wanted me to do?*

The pet population of the development matched the general distribution of pets in the American population. Three thousand humans shared their habitat with approximately two thousand animals, birds, and reptiles. And most of those organisms had been genetically "enhanced" in some way.

Van and Rosa had owned a succession of cats during the first thirty years of their marriage. They had bought the first one when Wally was three. The last one had died three years after Jessica left home for good. Van had always thought he liked cats, but he and Rosa had been tied down by the responsibilities of childrearing for over two decades.

Miniature rhinos looked cute. Three-foot elephants were even cuter. Van had happily advised several hosts that their flying creatures added color and poetry to their gardens. If he had been interested in non-human companionship, however, he would probably have settled for a floppypet. Robots didn't have to be fed or cleaned. And you could turn them off when you went away for the weekend.

You could even argue that the cute little rhino was only an inefficient, more demanding version of the floppypet. All modern pets came equipped with implanted programmable molecules that controlled their behavior. The flying creatures and the placidly munching mammals observed their owner's property lines because the lines were delineated by invisible programmed restrictions.

The safety measures built into the programmable molecules were a major topic on the mischief sites. There had only been three cases in which a mischief had managed to outflank the software engineers. All three had involved faults that had developed in the organisms. The mischiefs claimed the implant companies had repressed information about others but the companies had done a very successful job if they had.

The first indication the security software had been breached once again looked innocuous at first. The loungers in a parkside cafe spotted a lizard with a three-foot wingspan banking over the northwest section of the main park. The lizard had been given a reflective skin and it looked like a golden ornament in the glow cast by the park lights.

Then it dove. And warbled like a songbird as it sailed over the treetops with a plump, brain-enhanced beagle puppy clutched between its forelegs.

*I was supposed to release thirty animals altogether. From squirrels up to Labrador retrievers. That meant I had to make three trips from the road to the launch point on the south side of the park. Three miles round trip each time. Five or six cages per trip, on a handcart.*

*I unloaded all the cages from the car and stashed them a hundred yards from the road. Then I sent the car off by itself, to a parking area ten miles away. I figured I would start toward the road when I was ready to make my exit. And call the car when I had about half a mile to go.*

*They had it all worked out. I had a special transmitter that kept the park surveillance birds a hundred yards away. The park security system operated six hundred birds, they'd told me, and they followed random search patterns. There would be no indication the birds were deviating from their normal behavior.*

*You'll do fine, they told me. You release the animals. You stay there for about forty-five minutes operating the controls. And skip out. Free. And rich.*

The news of the attack emerged in pieces. It took Rosa almost fifteen minutes to realize it was happening. The police didn't start responding in an organized way for another five.

Elephants were roaming the streets. Rhinos were charging cars. A miniature T. Rex had entered a neighbor's yard and gorged on a flock of ornamental chickens penned inside a wall of ornamental hedges. Dogs and cats of all descriptions raced over yards and streets as if they were being pursued by an army of inflamed animal haters.

"It's the same thing he did with the floppypet," Rosa said. "Only now he's doing it with real animals. The police think it's being spread by transmitters attached to ground animals. They've spotted three of the carriers—the transmitters are just attached to collars and harnesses."

"So we're dealing with people who can attack a pet's software. . . ."

"But the external attachments indicate they may have thrown things together without a lot of preparation. It's spreading across an area that's roughly fan-shaped."

Rosa transferred a copy of her map display. Yellow dots marked the incident reports she was collecting from the police and the media cameras. The media rovers posted in the community had pounced on the first incidents merely because they fitted the profile for unusual, possibly newsworthy activities built into their programming. Now, like the police, the news merchants were starting to approach the turmoil as a large-scale event. Commentators had started yakking. The story had hopped from the local networks to the feeds that competed for wider audiences.

Rosa's map display included a red line that marked the border of the area infested with the yellow dots. The overall pattern, as she had said, was a rough fan shape. With the base of the fan in the north of the community. On the edge of the state park. The fan was expanding as new reports came in but the base didn't move.

"It looks like we can locate the release point with some precision," Van said.

"The pattern I'm seeing indicates somebody could still be there. I can see two places where it looks like a carrier started maneuvering inside an area instead of just passing through it."

"It's about a two-mile walk from there to the nearest road. The mischief could still be in the forest even if he released and ran."

"I've advised the police of that."

"And?"

Rosa hesitated. "We don't know how many people we're dealing with, love. They could have an armed gang standing by the release point, for all we know."

"Did you get a response from the police? Are they doing anything with the information?"

Van's newsfeed inserted an image of the outside of Bud's house in his visual display. A cat the size of a German shepherd was pacing across the front lawn. A large orange and red bird dangled from its mouth, wings half open.

He stepped up to the window and took a direct look at the scene. The clusters on the other side of the street were attracting new members. Two three-wheelers had stopped in front of the house and their passengers were gesturing at the cat as they talked to the people they were connected to.

He transmitted his personal visual to Rosa. Nobody seemed to be acting aggressive. Five teenage swaggerboys had taken over a patch on the opposite yard, with their hands on their bikes, but they looked like they were just gawking, too.

"You need to stay with Bud," Rosa said. "We don't know when the cops will get there."

"The cops are concentrating on dealing with the animals, right? They aren't going to do anything about the source of the problem."

"You can't leave Bud there alone. That's got to be our first priority."

"I'll take him with me. I parked my cart in the rear. I'll have to plough through some flower beds but we can get out and get moving before they see us on the news feeds."

*It was the highlight of my career. I had the news feeds on. I could get pickups from half the animals. The software was so good I could actually take close control of any piece of livestock I could connect with. I thought the thing with the cat and the bird was a stroke of genius. It was a real provoker. But nobody was going to cross that street while that cat was there. I figured they were just standing there looking at Bud's house and getting angrier and angrier.*

The flowerbed housed some kind of yellow autumn bloomers. Van drove across it without arousing any serious guilt feelings and pointed the front wheel toward the nearest segment of the cartway that would take him north.

The attack had started at the end of sunset. Van couldn't see the news birds in the dark but he knew they were up there. The birds would have picked them up as soon as he and Bud started hurrying toward the cart.

Bud was so big they had decided he should sit by himself in the rear area that doubled as a cargo space and third seat. The oversize earphones were still plastered on his head.

"I'm posting the map," Rosa said.

Van guided the cart around another flowerbed. It rolled onto the cartway and he took his thumb off the joystick and let the cart follow the route he had traced on the control screen. At the speed they were going, assuming they didn't run into any serious traffic, they would come within three hundred yards of their destination in about ten minutes. Then he would have to resume control and guide them across the golf course that occupied the northern perimeter of the development.

Rosa's voice sounded crisp and detached. She had stopped arguing with him when he had started moving but she was still convinced he was "blundering into something that could be totally unpredictable."

She was transmitting the map to all the news feeds and news sites on her lists. The animal handler hiding in the woods would know he had been located, but he would understand that as soon as the news feeds showed him the cart heading north—as they probably already had. The news birds could get him on their cameras before Van could reach him, if the news managers decided to dispatch them that way.

It was a logical thing to do. Van had agreed as soon as Rosa suggested it. But he knew she wasn't doing it because she thought it was a good tactical move. She had suggested it primarily because she was hoping they would get the mischief identified before her husband had to make physical contact.

*I had understood the news birds might come after me. But I hadn't realized that woman would get me located so soon. I knew what her husband could do. I knew she had pinned down my name. But I still didn't understand just how good she was.*

*I'd mingled with people her age. I could see how ninety-something could beat twenty-five if the ninety-something had everything the twenty-five had and sixty extra years of developing, too. But I still underestimated her. I'm willing to admit it. I let myself underestimate her.*

*But I wasn't totally unprepared, either. I had a nice bulky coat. I was carrying a hat with a brim that could have covered a car tire. I had two different live masks. They might get me on camera but they still wouldn't have me ID'd.*

*I couldn't call the car, of course. But I had an alternative to that, too. I wasn't stupid. I might be a kid to them but I was a smart kid.*

Van could see his cart on the news feeds, as he had expected. He was going too fast for the birds but somebody had obviously moved a mechanical media rover into position.

A cart rolled out of a driveway and took up a position about fifty yards back. The driver aimed a camera at him and his display presented him with a news feed that had opted for a view from the ground.

The driver had opted for a brush with celebrity. "Hi. This is Justin Devereaux. As you can see, I'm currently following the cart containing Bud Weldon and his intrepid caretaker. They sneaked out of Bud's house about five minutes ago and our little corner of the chatterverse erupted in a big debate two minutes after we learned they'd hit the road. Are they trying to sneak Bud to a safe hideaway because they're afraid we're all going to turn nasty and violent? Are they heading for the spot Mr. Levanti's wife has located on her map, so they can corner the joker who's given us the big night we're currently experiencing? My guess is it's the second option, given the way Bud's babysitters have been acting so far. Message to Valiant Van: I'm not here to hurt you. But don't think you can sneak away from me. You have attracted the attention of Justin the Implacable. Where you go, Justin goes."

A second cart turned out of an intersection and fell in behind the first. The three passengers were all waving at the cameras as if they were campaigning for a particularly attractive political office.

*Van Levanti had a regular parade following him. Carts. Bicycles. Scooters. People on riding animals. It probably wasn't more than a hundred people. But it looked pretty impressive on the news feeds. And they weren't going to be greeting me with big smiles, whatever they thought about Bud and the great experiment. I should have gotten out as soon as I knew they had me located.*

*I figured I could hang on until Van started across the golf course. I still hadn't shown up on the news shots. I'd put on the hat and the first mask so I'd be ready when they did spot me. So why leave now? When I was still having fun? I could even try a few maneuvers that might prolong the party. I had kept one of my carriers in the area Van was going through. And I still had some creatures in the area I could play with.*

The cow was about half the size of a typical unmodified representative of the species—the kind of animal you kept for a pet if you happened to like a family-size supply of fresh milk every day. It was standing broadside in the middle of a bridge that crossed one of the brooks that ran through the community.

Van honked and waved his arms but of course it didn't move. He nudged its back haunches with the front of the cart and it went on staring into the darkness without budging.

Something big fluttered on the right side of his visual field. The cart rocked. A bird screamed and beat its wings in front of Bud's face.

Van's arms shot out. Feathers hammered against his face. His left hand closed around the bird's neck. He was right-handed but his left hand had found an opening and he wasn't going to stop and change hands.

The wing beats slowed. The bird twitched and struggled and he held on until it stopped moving.

He stared at the thing hanging from his hand. It was the first time he had ever killed anything. He had been slaughtering simulated adversaries since he had been five years old but this was the first time he had actually ended the life of a living or-



ganism bigger than a bug. He looked around for a moment, wondering what to do, and tossed the cadaver into the creek with the same hand he had used to kill it.

But had already slumped into his seat and lost himself in his electronic dream world. The cart belonging to Justin the Implacable had stopped about twenty-five yards away, with the rest of the procession halted behind it.

He pulled the manual control out of its slot. The brook was about fifteen feet wide. The bank had a steep slope near the bridge but he could roll down a grassy angle if he maneuvered a few yards to the right.

*I already knew what I was going to do when Van backed off the bridge. I waited until he'd put some space between him and the bridge. Then I moved the cow off the bridge, just the right distance. If he tried to ford the brook, I could move the cow down the bank and block him when he tried to come out of the water. And I could still put the cow back on the bridge if he gave up on the ford. He would make it across sooner or later but I could have a little fun harassing him.*

*Except for Justin the Camera Hog. I hadn't counted on him. He went rolling across the bridge with his arm raised, waving his fist at the cameras, and stopped his cart between the bridge and the cow. Van turned back to the bridge and I estimated the distance he still had to travel. And decided it was time I initiated my disengagement procedure.*

Van turned off the cartway and started rolling across the golf course five minutes after the incident with the cow. Justin had given him a wave when he crossed the bridge and he had played along and flashed a grin and a thumbs up sign in return.

"They've got our opponent on camera," Rosa said. "Here he is."

Van opened a display in the lower left quarter of his visual field. The image looked like it was being transmitted from a source that was operating below tree level. He had a clear view of a figure in a coat and hat kneeling over a cluster of electronic components.

"He's right about where we thought he would be," Rosa said. "About a hundred yards west of the predicted zero point."

"Is that maximum enhancement?"

"I ran it through an extra enhancement before I transmitted it to you. It didn't get any better."

"Do you know what the source is?"

"It's a bird. They've got a mechanical in the area but it's too big to operate under the trees."

Van altered the destination he had placed on the cart's screen. His finger traced a route.

"Six minutes," Van said. "Ten at the most."

*My co-conspirators had included a self-destruct system in the setup they'd given me. I hated to wreck equipment like that. I'd been hoping I could take it with me. So I probably delayed longer than I should have.*

*I kept the gadget that held off the park birds. The news cameras had me spotted but I could see they just had one bird in the forest.*

*This was the first time I'd operated in a wilderness environment. I'd done some serious skulking in my other escapades but I'd never made a trek through a forest. But I'd known it might happen when I made my plans. And it wasn't like I'd never seen a patch of forest. I had never maneuvered through anything this big but I had shot my way across combat ranges that included acres of trees and cover.*

\* \* \*

"It looks like he's not going directly to the road," Rosa said.

"I'm not too surprised," Van said. "He's been too smart to ruin it all at the last minute and let us get a look at a license number."

The cart topped a rise near the end of a sand trap and rolled down a long slope toward the edge of the forest. The lights on the cart were short-range units designed for the cartway but Van had switched from direct vision to a two-element display. The program enhanced the information provided by the available light and combined it with information from the maps and visual records stored in the data banks. The view beyond the headlights was a fabrication that had to be treated with care.

"They still don't have any other cameras in the area?" Van asked.

"I'm working on a fallback. He's obviously using something that keeps the park birds out of visual range. That means there has to be a recurring hole in the surveillance pattern wherever he is. It isn't obvious because the park security system has a limited number of birds flying a random pattern. But I'm running an analysis now."

The cart slipped under the branches of the first tree. He glanced over his shoulder and noted the situation in that direction hadn't changed. Justin was still keeping station at twenty-five yards, with a dozen lights scattered over the grass behind him.

*I thought I was in pretty good shape when the news bird fell behind. I zigzagged a little just to be on the safe side. Then I beelined straight for my objective. It didn't occur to me Mrs. Van could be tracking the gap in the info from the park surveillance system. My patrons had given me a good pair of night vision glasses—so good I would have felt like I was walking along in broad daylight if I'd had color. I figured I'd slip into the mall at the west edge of the park, switch clothes, and disappear into the general population. They could prove I had been at the mall if they managed to track the car rental but that would be it. There would be no evidence I had actually done anything.*

"Why don't you let me out?" Bud said. "You'll go faster without me."

One of the most useful benefits of aging, in Van's opinion, had been a measurable decrease in his overall flappability. Rosa had noticed that she, too, felt significantly more even-tempered. Even so, in spite of all his attainments in emotional growth and development, he still had to resist the impulse to jerk his head around when the voice from the back seat broke through his concentration on the ground in front of the cart.

"I can sit under a tree somewhere," Bud said. "You don't need the extra weight."

Had Bud been paying attention all the time he had been lost in his eworld? Was that the kind of thing you learned to do in prison? Immerse yourself in something imaginary to make the whole thing bearable? While some part of you monitored the scene around you so you could survive?

"It's not you, Bud. It's the terrain. I could probably move faster if I just got out and ran after him."

"Then why don't you? You chase him down on foot and I'll follow in the cart."

Van frowned. Bud had been so passive and withdrawn he had started thinking of him as an inactive lump—a package carted from place to place.

Could Bud come out of that protective shell and take some control after sixty-six years in an environment in which things happened to him and he never made anything happen? Shouldn't they give him the chance?

"Can you handle the cart? This isn't like driving along the cartway. We can still use the light enhancement. But the map data can't show you every little dip and tree root."

"I can keep it moving in the right direction."

Van opened his connection to Rosa and presented the change in plan as a settled decision.

"If the guy we're chasing is the kind of guy he appears to be, I can probably just stay behind him until he collapses if he tries to run."

"You just have to keep him in sight," Rosa said. "Just keep that in mind—you just have to keep him in sight."

*Physically, it wasn't any big deal. I had to cover five miles to reach the mall but I wasn't stumbling around in the dark. And I was traveling light. I had a small shoulder bag with two clothes changes and a twelve-inch bow, plus the anti-bird gadget.*

*So I thought I was okay. And I would have been if that woman hadn't been using all her brain cells. I didn't know it, but Van was jogging through the woods looking at a map display with a gray oval. The oval was about two hundred yards long and half that wide. And I was somewhere inside it.*

*I wouldn't have known he was anywhere near me if he hadn't been using a light. It was a red light and it wasn't very bright. But it moved as he ran. So I caught it when I looked back. I had been listening for motor noise but I was making visual checks of my back, too. Never underestimate the things you learn playing games.*

Van ran with an easy lope he had acquired through decades of running, starting when he was still in his thirties, before he had realized the curve of medical progress might keep him alive for as long as he felt like hanging around. He had removed his camera pin from his sweater and pasted it on his cheek, just under his left eye, so he could observe his surroundings through the enhanced feed from the camera. It was a crude solution to the night vision problem but a handy thing to have around in emergencies—as long as you remembered you were looking at an image that was slightly skewed from the image you would see with your own eye.

The enhancement program was working with the fraction of starlight and skyglow that seeped through the trees. Mr. Mischief was only thirty yards ahead when Van spotted him.

"I've got a visual sighting. He's running west and he's about fifty yards this side of the center of your oval, to the left some. I'm reducing the gap a few strides."

"Is that necessary?"

"I can barely see him, love. I might have gone right by him if he'd been standing still."

*I knew I couldn't outrun him five minutes after he closed in behind me. I've been running into aerobic exercise fanatics ever since I got stuck in a kindergarten where a loony jock actually had us running relay races on tricycles. I'd be doubling over sucking in air in another twenty minutes and he'd still be gliding along like he was just getting started.*

*I had carried the bow with me just in case but I didn't just stuff it in my gear bag. I'd given it some thought. I'd packed a self-defense load I kept in my apartment because I knew it was something I could actually use. I pulled the cocking lever while I was still running. And shoved the bolt into the groove as I turned around.*

Van threw himself to the left, into the cold autumn smell of dirt and dead leaves. He raised his head and saw Curt Damil staring down at him—it had to be Curt Damil, that was a crossbow. Curt turned away and Van scrambled to his feet.

He tipped back his head and stared at the branches. There was something dangling from the side of his jacket. A bright star dominated a triangular patch of sky. Mars? Jupiter? Should he file a query?

A woman was saying something. In his ear. He couldn't see a woman anywhere. But he could hear her.

"What's going on? Are you all right?"

Trees. Branches. Forest. It all changed when you turned around. Everything changed.

"Can you see him, Bud? Can anybody see Van?"

The world shifted. He looked at the thing dangling from his jacket and realized it was an arrow—a bolt, when you were talking about crossbows. He pulled it out and stared at the needle on the end.

"I'm fine, Rosa. I'm all right."

"I heard you grunt. And then I didn't hear anything."

He still had the gray oval on his display. He couldn't see Curt but he knew which way to go. How long had it been? A minute?

"I'm okay. I lost sight of him. I'll get him back."

*He wasn't going to give up. I'd been told a lot of people just gave up once they'd experienced a couple of minutes of disorientation. But he obviously wasn't the quitting type.*

*I could feel my heart knocking already. Five more minutes of this and I'd be the one who was wondering where he was. Only in my case I'd be running around in circles because I needed oxygen.*

*This time I yelled at him to stay put. "This one's for real," I said. "This time you aren't getting up."*

*He actually stopped. I thought he'd duck, like he did before, but he just stopped dead. His hands shot up.*

*I knew I had to act. I had never shot at a living target before—not even a squirrel—but this was no time to hesitate. He was giving me the best chance I was going to get.*

*I lowered the bow before he realized what I was doing and hit him in the lower right thigh. It was an easy shot. I just had to forget about the effect if something went wrong and I hit him somewhere else.*

*I started moving while he was still going down. I think I only heard him yell once.*

The pain had shifted to bearable once the initial shock wore off. The blood was forming a widening stain under his pants, but he knew enough first aid to know it would have been pulsing if the bolt had punctured an artery.

"We'll be there in about twenty minutes, Mr. Levanti," the chief of the emergency medical team said. "We're going to drive up to the edge of the park and come in on foot. Just lie still. We'll get the bleeding stopped as soon as we get there."

"We can have Bud drive you toward them in the cart," Rosa said.

"I'm probably better off lying here."

"It sounds like it's a clean wound," the EMT chief said.

Light swayed across the area around him. Bud jumped out of his cart and dropped to one knee. His big pudgy hands hovered over the bolt.

"Are you all right? Can you lie here by yourself?"

"I'm fine, Bud."

Bud heaved himself to his feet. "Then I'll go after him."

"You don't have to do that," Rosa said. "We've got him identified. The crossbow proves it's Curt Damil."

"Did Van see his face? Get a picture? You need hard evidence."

"He's already used that crossbow once, Bud. He's clearly getting desperate."

"It's too late," Van said. "Bud's already moving."

*So now I had another aerobics loon on my tail. I didn't know how much running he'd done but I knew he bicycled every day. And he'd been sitting in his cart all the time I'd been trying to pull away from his babysitter.*

*I could use the disorienter on him, of course. But I already knew how much good that did. I didn't need a couple of minutes. I needed a permanent unequivocal cessation.*

*He wasn't a fool. He knew I had the bow. He stayed with me but he used the cover, too. He was a big guy but he knew how to stay low. So his body covered his legs.*

*I turned around, ready to release, and he dropped to his knees and held something in front of him. He'd taken off his jacket. It wouldn't stop a real bolt but it would trigger the hypo before it got to him if I used the disorienter.*

*I made two tries. At least two tries. By now I was getting too groggy to count. He dropped down every time before I could shoot. With the jacket held in front of him.*

*The last time—whichever time it was—I ripped the bolt out of the groove. I held it up so he could see it was the real thing.*

*"This one is for real," I said. "It's going right through that jacket. Into your chest. Get up. Turn around. Run the other way."*

*I leveled the bow at his chest. It was an easy shot, like they'd all been. He knew I could do it.*

*I gave him one more chance. "It's the only way I can stop you," I told him. "It's the only chance I have to get away."*

*I can tell you exactly what he said, word for word. I'm not giving you some made up dialogue just to be dramatic. I'll remember every word he said even if I really do live a thousand years.*

*"So do it," Bud said. "Kill me. I'm never going back there. They'll put you there instead."*

Rosa seemed satisfyingly concerned right up to the moment the medics removed the arrow and it became clear Van was enjoying a comfortable ride to the hospital. By the time she got to the hospital herself, she had returned to checking her displays and running analyses. As for her feelings about her husband—she had obviously switched to the head shaking I-love-him-but-what-have-I-married? mode she fell into whenever her marital partner did something no rational human would even consider.

"So what are you going to do with Bud?" Rosa asked Steinman.

"The governor is evaluating the situation," Steinman said.

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"The surveys correlate with our daughter's prediction," Rosa said. "The primary reaction among 70 percent of the commentators is anger directed at the people who did all the damage."

"We're aware of all that. The governor will take it all into consideration."

"And how about Bud's own contributions? Doesn't that count for something? That's one of the main aspects people are commenting on."

"The governor told me I should offer you both another thank you. He's been very impressed with the way you've handled this."

"We're glad he's satisfied," Van said. "You can tell him I can probably be back on the job in two or three days."

"I'll pass the word," Steinman said. And broke the connection with his customary display of camaraderie.

"I can just see them," Rosa said. "Steinman and the governor and all the rest of them sitting around the governor's office *evaluating*."

"I'd say the odds favor Bud," Van said. "That's where the votes seem to be."

"I know. But still."

"We've still got a job, Rosa. We're still here. We're still together."

Rosa smiled—the soft smile that wiped out all the focus her face had acquired as they aged. The smile only Van ever saw.

"There is that," Rosa said.

*I have to admit I had some second thoughts when I saw how they reacted when I told them I could only identify two contacts. They kept coming back to me for more. And I had to keep telling them that was my only link with the operators who'd set me up. It got pretty rough sometimes. They didn't seem to have any worries about proper legal procedures. Then they showed me some videos and I gave them a solid identification. After that things got better.*

*I don't know what they did with the data. Probably nobody will ever know. My guess is they used it to make some kind of deal with our smiling governor's political enemies. Something that would give him an extra edge when he made his next career move.*

*Mischiefs don't go to jail. They catch us, we do what we have to. We all understand that. It's one of the main reasons mischiefs usually work alone. We aren't some secret society swearing we'll keep our mouths locked even if they rip our skin off. I would have given them more information if I'd had it. But the stuff I gave them was good enough.*

*The newsies keep making a thing about my ankle bracelet. And how it may stop other mischiefs because they think we're afraid of being shamed. But this wasn't an ordinary escapade. I let myself go too far. Like Bud did. I let them tempt me. But I stopped myself before it turned into something really bad.*

*Bud wasn't the most articulate person you'll ever meet. He had been a loner before they shut him up and sixty-six years in prison hadn't given him much opportunity to sharpen his social skills. But I knew he meant it when he told me I would have to kill him to stop him. You would have, too, if you'd been there. You would have reacted just the way I did when you heard the way he sounded when he told me they'd put me there instead.*

*I'm a mischief, not a murderer. I can take two years house arrest. I like to think I could survive three or four years in a real prison if I had to. But I'm not going to sit in a cage for the next half century like Bud did.*

*Bud Weldon was a mischief. He fouled up big and he paid for it big. But he was still a mischief. He got in trouble because he was out there doing the job. Striking back at all the people who think they're safe. Evening things up. You can't have mischiefs running around killing mischiefs. What would the world be like? ○*



John Alfred Taylor is now a professor-emeritus, retired from teaching English at Washington and Jefferson College. A collection of his short stories, *Hell Is Murky*, was recently published by Ash-Tree Press. The book, which is mostly comprised of horror and ghost stories, includes "The Shorn Lamb" (December 1993) and "The Game of Nine" (September 2001)—two tales that were first published in *Asimov's*. While his latest story is a science fiction tale, it deftly describes a terrifying night in the life of one . . .

# BARE, FORKED ANIMAL

John Alfred Taylor

Jacyn's door won't open. And it is his door, even if it's gray instead of crimson, because he recognizes the dent in the lower left quadrant. "It's me," he tells the door. "Open up."

Just set down from a traveling party, he's dizzy and euphoric, cheek smeared with lipstick and still holding what's left of a dreamstik. "Open for Jacyn Wilde," he orders, and takes another bite of the dreamstik.

The panel doesn't budge and he strikes it blindly, then doubles over, wondering if he's broken anything. He straightens as the pain of his fist turns to a dull throb, and sees that all brightness is gone. Usually he arrives through a rainbow iris, but now his world is as gray as the door, with a metal lid above rather than sky and cloud, and a fretwork of microbots underfoot instead of the green turf he remembers.

There's no visual overlay at all, he can't even bring up descriptors for his surroundings. Everything's wrong, all bare bones and sharp edges—he needs to call emergency services, but there's no ready ping when he commands "Phone." He says it louder. Nothing. He shouts—

Afterward Jacyn looks down at his shoes, and begins to understand. They're just plain black, not the gilded boots he programmed. And now his sleeves are only standard coverall sleeves, pale tan rather than purple and scarlet party jags. Worst of all, the blinking lights on his wrist panel are dead. He's off the locator grid and unpowered.

Though where is *here*? All Jacyn recognizes is his door and the shape of the plaza, beyond that knows only that he's somewhere in the Northwest Sector. All he ever had to do was state his destination and the transporter would automatically take him there in his private bubble.

Seemingly private, he reminds himself—overlay hid lots of things. Golden mist had formed around the perimeter of the moving party, but how many other travelers on a parallel vector were beyond the shining wall? The cloud dilated to let him out, Lisa and Helen gave him goodbye hugs, and now he's standing on a metal carpet.

Then Jacyn realizes he's shut out of more than his cubicle, and his legs feel weak.

The system's lost him, no longer tracks his eyes so lasers can show him overlay or descriptors, no longer listens for his commands. Always before the conurb has responded, fed and clothed him, answered his questions, kept him entertained, even monitored his health.

Now he's a castaway: in the city but not of the city, marooned like in the old stories, but in the midst of everything, not on a desert island. Except it's a desert for him. He could starve or die of thirst with food and drink only a few meters away.

Impossible. Then Jacyn remembers the half-finished dreamstik he must have dropped when he hurt his hand. Still edible he guesses, and every little bit will help. There it is, beside the door. As he bends over, the mesh of microbots around it ripples and dimples, opening to swallow the dreamstik, then closes again while he pulls back his hand just in time.

Some waste disposal system! He hopes it doesn't scale up.

Jacyn's been standing too long, and carefully lowers himself to sit cross-legged, not too close to where the dreamstik vanished. What next? Wait for someone else to come home, he supposes, and make enough noise to be noticed. Except the party lasted a long time, and maybe everybody around is already in bed.

But they'll be waking in a few hours. He only has to waylay one to be rescued. And if that fails, people will be looking for him once he doesn't show up for rehearsal. There's no way to do *King Lear* without Lear, and he is Jacyn Wilde. He stands, braces himself, and roars fortissimo:

*Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!  
You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout  
Till you have drench'd our steeples, drown'd the cocks!  
You sulphurous and thought-executing fires,  
Vaunt-couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts,  
Singe my white head!*

Jacyn stutters to a stop: the speech needs thunder and lightning and racing wind, rather than ducts and channels and distant emergency lights as sky. He sighs in exhaustion.

Perhaps he can sleep. Folding his jacket for a pillow, he lies down on the crinkled metal, shifting restlessly till he loses consciousness.

Jacyn aches all over and his eyes are sticky. His mouth tastes awful. He has no idea what time it is or what woke him—everything looks the same as before, ducts and channels and dim lights.

When he hears the faint mechanical whine again he looks up and notices hexagonal gaps in the ceiling by each cubicle. Then a hexagonal cage starts descending from an opening four units to the right as the cubicle door facing it slides open. Jacyn's on his feet instantly, shouting and rushing toward the opening, but staggers as he hits a wall of noise. The emerging tenant walks into the elevator without noticing and it rises smoothly into the ceiling.

Jacyn stands baffled as the door clicks shut. He understands not being seen—the other's overlay painted him out because the city doesn't know he exists. But his neighbor should have heard him shouting.

Another elevator is starting down on the other side of the little square. Jacyn screams as loud as he can and is halfway across when he's almost deafened again. By the time he recovers the elevator is retracting into the overhead.

Gasping for breath, Jacyn realizes what happened. His shouting was noise to the computer surround, and god forbid that his neighbors should be subjected to noise. So both times a noise-control system kicked in: the blasts of sound striking him were wave forms the reverse of what he was screaming, canceling signals to add up zero.

Transport elevators keep arriving around the perimeter of the square, and Jacyn

tries to intercept four more neighbors before he gives up and squats on the whorls of the metal floor.

His mouth is terribly dry, and he remembers that a person can only survive three days without water. Behind his door there's water from the kitchen faucet, there's juice and beer in his refrigerator, something to slake his thirst inside every cubicle facing on the square. But he could die out here and not be noticed till the stink got bad.

Then Jacyn catches himself. Panic won't help. And he's forgotten one possibility, the single other place in the square where liquids are available. He's used the convenience vender in the far corner of the square when he forgot to pick things up while he was out.

It has a door too, a window really, but maybe not as solid as the house doors. Worth a try anyway.

The window doesn't light up at his approach—not that he really expected it, but one can always hope. The vender looks drab without the surrounding overlay, but the inside's not so dim he can't see the racked bottles of Coke and Juice-Plus. "Juice-Plus please," he says, and nothing happens. "Juice-Plus," he repeats.

When he was small, vending machines took coins, doors had knobs, your computer sat safely on your desk and you could turn it on and off. Now he has to use force to liberate a bottle of juice.

Jacyn backs away and kicks the panel as hard as he can—it's not glass but something more elastic, and it springs back against his foot so fast he has to struggle to keep his balance. He braces himself and kicks it lower down, two three four times in the same place. Not even a scratch.

Maybe he can spring the metal frame. He aims at the bottom, stamping and kicking till he's out of breath, and barely sees a dent. At best it will take him days to bend it enough, with his shoes in tatters long before that.

If he only had a tool, a knife, a hammer—even one of the bottles in there.

Earlier he's told himself his director or stage manager would try to find him after he missed rehearsal; now he wonders whether Shimon or Charlus can. His phone and locator chip are dead, his house doesn't know him, and he'll be invisible and inaudible if a friend shows up.

Though if he can stand in front of his door he'll be close enough to touch. Except by then he could be too weak from thirst. Why wait for Shimon or Charlus—there'll be people coming home around the square this afternoon and evening.

All he has to do is block somebody's door and make physical contact.

He has no idea what time it is, so he needs to get into position now. Jacyn chooses the nearest side of the square—people will be arriving unpredictably and one row of cubicles is as likely a target as another. He leans against the door in the middle to give himself the best chance to intercept anyone arriving at either end—

He jerks awake, to see an elevator coming down on the other side of the square. Too far, and by the time the hexagonal cage rises its passenger has disappeared inside.

Jacyn stares at the closed door and sighs, then groans when another elevator descends over there. Pure luck, with no way to guess where the next person might come home. He remembers a lecture on the laws of chance: even if a flipped coin comes down heads a hundred times, there's still a fifty-fifty chance of it coming down heads the next time. Maybe the numbers don't quite fit, but something of the sort applies. What he knows for certain is that his tongue is dry as sandpaper and that his legs barely hold him up.

A transporter comes down by the wall on the right. Without overlay, Jacyn sees the woman as she is—wearing the basic coverall like everybody else, rather than the costume she programmed. Then she's in, and he's watching for the next arrival.

Another appears across the square, next someone returns on the far left. Never a person near enough. Jacyn quivers with frustration, but stays where he is. Only a matter of time before somebody shows up on this side, so why give up his advantage.

One more coming on the left, then two more across the square, two on the right, but no one along this wall till he's ready to scream—except who would hear him.

When another starts descending on the far left side Jacyn snaps, giving up his chosen place, and staggering toward the arrival as fast as he can. By the time he reaches it that elevator is rising and the door is shut.

As if in mockery after all this time, one finally comes down at the wall he deserted, near the place he was waiting. Jacyn's curse is more a croak, too weak to activate the noise-canceling system, and he totters back a few steps before he collapses.

When he regains consciousness everything is still. His tongue is leather, his breath rasps in his throat.

He can't die here, Jacyn tells himself. Not this close to home. It's absurd, unfair. Rage and desperation get him to his feet, propel him to the corner of the square containing the vending machine. The only thing he can think to do, and maybe he'll get lucky.

He concentrates on the same place at the bottom of the frame as before, then kicks too hard and wonders if he's broken his toe, but doesn't let the pain slow him down, instead turns and uses his heel. Finally he switches to his other foot till he can't go on.

Jacyn nearly falls when he leans forward to see the results. The metal strip around the window is bent more. He straightens to test the plastic with his good foot, but it's still solid, and snaps Jacyn back till he's off balance.

When he sits up, trying to recover his breath after the fall, he notices the interlinked units of the floor turning in tiny circles making a path leading toward him. That doesn't make sense until a low panel next to the vending machine opens and a shape rides out on the churning floor. Two paddle-like flippers open like arms to guide him into the mouth of the machine—and it is a mouth, reciprocating steel teeth flashing.

When the floor swallowed the remainder of his dreamstik he'd wondered if that scaled up. No need—this is what disposes of larger waste.

Jacyn kicks at the machine and loses half the sole of his shoe to the teeth, then rolls desperately over a flipper to get out of its way. The thing turns clumsily, opening its paddles again. Even if he's nimbler, it will keep coming till it wears him down. He imagines it catching a foot when he slows down, then toppling him, to shred him piecemeal while he's still alive.

Its shape gives him a hint. Except for the arch of the mouth in front the thing reminds him of a sea turtle, though the flippers are vertical, not horizontal. On its back the machine should be helpless as a turtle, but the carapace is flush with the floor, no way to get his fingers under.

He jumps over a paddle again as the robot swivels, then realizes this is his chance, and stoops very low to lift the paddle with both hands, hoping the linkage between the flipper and the chassis is strong enough. Because leverage is all.

His shoulders and knees feel ready to pop, every muscle in his body shudders with the strain. He can't do it, but it's now or never. He straightens, almost fainting, pulls the paddle up and over as he feels the linkage begin to fail, and then the thing is on its back, steel blades still blurring back and forth, paddles flapping pointlessly.

Looking at the underside, he understands how it moved. Instead of wheels there are fixed pegs that fit gaps in the shifting mosaic of the floor.

He's still dazed when an elevator descends in the middle of the square. The man who emerges wears a blue uniform and a helmet with a smoky visor, and after a quick glance at the robot looks straight at him. Actually *sees him*, which means the purpose of the visor is to blank out the overlay.

"Water," Jacyn gasps.

In the hospital he's rehydrated and fed, a little at a time so he can keep it down, before they extract the dead locator chip from his shoulder and insert a new one. A grizzled bureaucrat stands by during the activation check, then sits down beside him and presents a form for him to sign. Jacyn can't understand the need for a secrecy agreement: "Why not tell people what really happened?"

"Because it would give them a near impossibility to worry about, frighten them for no good reason. The mean time to failure of a locator chip is over a thousand years."

Jacyn doesn't ask how they know that. "Mine failed," he insists.

"Right," says the government man. "But remember the impossible becomes possible when six billion people are wearing a chip."

"So what do I tell my friends happened instead?"

"You're in a hospital—start from that. You came down with a bad stomach bug, your phone went with your clothes, the admitting office got your name wrong and didn't check it with your locator chip, etcetera etcetera."

"You sure I have to lie?"

The grizzled man grins. "I want you to tell your director as soon as you sign the form."

"You'll have to walk me through it first."

Jacyn reads every page on the electronic clipboard before he signs, rehearses the lie, and then phones his director.

"Where've you been?" says Shimon.

"It's a long story," he begins.

They're rehearsing the scene where Kent and the Fool lead Lear to a hovel where he can take shelter from the storm. The storm effects are on overhead, but muted. The Fool's gone into the hovel, then comes out in a hurry, followed by Edgar disguised as Poor Tom. Jacyn admires the way Piet plays Edgar playing Tom, balancing the absurd against fear of the foul fiend wonderfully, extreme but controlled. Nobody can laugh at Piet's mad act.

But now it's Lear's time.

He looks at Piet, naked except for a ragged clout:

*Why, thou wert better in thy grave than to answer with thy uncovered body this extremity of the skies. Is man no more than this? Consider him well. Thou owest the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. Ha! here's three on 's are sophisticated! Thou art the thing itself: unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor bare, forked animal as thou art.*

It's time to strip. Jacyn is wearing breakaway clothes over his coverall, so Lear can reduce himself to naked equality with Tom:

*Off, off, you lendings! come unbutton here.*

As he tears off his costume Jacyn is embarrassed to find himself weeping now he's learned how it feels to be "a poor bare, forked animal."

Luckily the Fool and Edgar have the next lines, and he has time to recover before anyone notices. He's already lied about what happened to him, and now he'll have to hide what he feels. Maybe even from himself. Part of his profession—wasn't "hypocrite" originally Greek for *actor*?

Then Gloucester enters with a torch, and Jacyn's back into what matters, playing a King who never was from before history began. ○

Eric Brown lives near Cambridge, England, in a seventeenth-century thatched cottage. He's written over thirty books and a hundred short stories, and has twice won the British Science Fiction Award for best short story. Eric reviews science fiction for the London *Guardian*. His latest novel is *Xenopath* (Solaris 2009), and his website can be found at: [www.ericbrown.co.uk](http://www.ericbrown.co.uk). His first story for *Asimov's* takes an icy look at the various forms of . . .

# COLD TESTING

Eric Brown

I phased *A Long Way From Home* from the void and brought us down on Nova Charon for a period of cold testing.

"Why the CT now?" Karrie my engineer asked, staring through the viewscreen at the outermost planet in the Antares system. Stark, ice-grey craters and serried peaks stretched across the horizon beyond the concrete apron of the spaceport.

"I'm considering taking the ship to the Epsilon Centauri system," I told her. "All the planets there are way beyond the Goldilocks Limit."

Karrie stared at me. "They're inhabited by Shlocken," she said. "You're not thinking of trading with them?"

"Who said anything about trading, Karrie? We're a salvage ship, remember?"

"And we do a bit of trading on the side. Why else would you take us into Shlocken territory? Surely not to salvage their ships? The shrimps have got their own—"

"I know, I know. And they don't like outsiders interfering."

"So. . . ?" she asked, jerking her head forward and staring at me with wide eyes.

I told her what I'd kept to myself until now. "I've been talking with Ella about a rumor I heard way back."

"Ella?" She pronounced the name as if it tasted of Lyran poison-weed. There was no love lost between my long-time engineer and the latest recruit to the team. "What rumor?"

"I heard a story. I was in some bar in the Ophiuchi system and this spacer was telling a tale about an old colleague of his, who'd heard it from an old timer he'd worked with on the lanes."

Karrie stared at me. "Heard *what*, for chrissake?"

"That a hundred years ago a Terran ship entered Shlocken territory before we'd had contact with the shrimps, and it went down with drive failure on a sequestered moon. Everyone aboard was killed."

Karrie leaned back in her sling and regarded me. "And what does Ella know about this?"

I pointed at her. "Ella knows that it's more than a story. She has records in her files of a report sent by the captain before the ship was lost."

Karrie sneered. "Lost starships just happen to be another hobby of super-girl, Ed?"

I shrugged. "She has access to information we can only dream of."



"So . . ." Karrie laughed. "We breeze in there, under the nose of the bellicose shrimps, and salvage the wreck. Nice dream. But what if the shrimps find us?"

"The Shlocken aren't that bellicose, Karrie. Only if you cross them. Terran ships aren't excluded from their system. And anyway, the moon is so far out and insignificant that they don't patrol it."

"And," said a new voice, "the Shlocken know nothing about the crashed exploration vessel."

Ella pulled herself onto the flight-deck, and it was all I could do to not to stare at her perfection. There is beauty, and then there is Ella—which is something of a paradox because my co-pilot isn't even human.

"Anyway," I said, "in a month we're going in. If we find the ship, manage to get it back, it'll be worth millions."

"And if the Shlocken find us we'll be dead."

Ella stared at Karrie with her vast Venezuelan eyes, and said coolly, "That is a mistaken assumption, Karrie. They will merely expel us from the system. You humans have a saying: nothing ventured, nothing gained."

Karrie bit back her frustration. "We haven't even voted—" she began. Then: "Okay, okay. But I'll be going under protest, got that?"

I nodded. "Anyway, to answer your question: that's why we're on Nova Charon. We're cold testing the ship."

"And while we're here," Ella put in, "I'll be cold testing myself, too."

She slid into the co-pilot's sling and regarded the bleak scene outside.

I could see that Karrie was considering whether to ask Ella just what the hell she meant by that, but she restrained herself. Instead she jumped from her sling and climbed down the ladder from the flight deck, muttering all the way.

"Cold testing *yourself*, Ella?" I asked when we were alone.

Dammit, but when I was in her company my stomach fluttered like some lovesick schoolboy's.

She turned lustrous eyes on me. "You find that surprising, Ed? I am, after all, an AI."

"But . . ." I gestured beyond the screen. "You mean you can withstand . . . *that*?"

"The air is breathable, Ed."

"But it's fifty degrees below out there!"

"I need to determine exactly what I can tolerate. It might be necessary, once we land on the Shlocken moon."

I nodded, even though the thought of Ella out there in the elements didn't sit well with my love-struck, macho desire to protect and cherish my co-pilot.

Through the viewscreen I watched as a small maintenance vehicle, for all the world like a trilobite, zipped from the terminal building and approached us. The com chimed and I accepted the call.

"We're ready to begin just as soon as the main drive and auxiliaries have cooled," an engineer said. "That okay with you?"

"A-OK," I said. "She's all yours."

"While we're working on the ship, perhaps you'd care to sample Nova Charon's hospitality? We have an extensive subterranean hotel complex at the disposal of visiting crews."

"We're on our way," I said, and cut the connection.

I smiled at Ella, but she didn't respond. She was staring through the viewscreen at the ice fields with eyes that only appeared human.

"Approximately ten thousand years ago," said the tour guide, a small woman in a

trim red uniform, "Nova Charon's orbit of Antares was three AUs closer to its primary. The mean temperature on the surface of the planet was twenty degrees higher than it is now, and the planet sustained a native sentient lifeform called the Kreath."

We were strolling along inside a glass tube that extended from the hotel complex into the hive of warrens and alien living-hollows that riddled the near surface of Nova Charon. Through the curved glass we stared at the Kreath tunnels, adorned with frescos showing the anthropoid aliens going about their everyday business. We'd passed through several living-hollows, vast chambers pocked with holes that were the entrances to Kreath dwellings.

We were a group of fifteen, the crews of various ships currently in port and a couple of rich tourists. Karrie had deigned to come along, muttering that she had nothing better to do. Ella was at my side—which gave me a cheery glow—murmuring her own commentary to fill in the gaps left by the tour guide's.

"The Kreath were what you term hunter-gatherers," Ella murmured to me. "They lived on the surface of the planet, but as millennia passed and Nova Charon moved further from Antares, to protect themselves from the increasing cold they migrated underground."

Karrie huffed and moved away from us.

The guide said, "Archaeological work has been ongoing beneath the surface for almost fifty years, as long as the Cold Testing station has been situated on Nova Charon. In that time, experts have learned much about the life of the aliens. They were a technologically primitive people by our standards, though with a rich culture of arts and a complex spiritual awareness."

We moved along the tube, passing through more living-hollows and Kreath access tunnels toward the surface. The brochure I'd scanned in my room had boasted a moving climax to the tour on the surface of the planet.

One of the tourists asked, "What became of the Kreath? Did any of them survive?"

The guide turned to us and smiled. "Sadly, they were unable to overcome the irrevocable outward drift of their planet. They retreated ever deeper beneath the surface, but with the constant winter gripping their world, crops failed and food became scarce."

Ella said, accessing files within her inexhaustible cache, "They were a noble people who disdained warfare, and went to their deaths—to 'life beyond this realm,' as they had it—with dignity. Many committed mass suicide before their food supplies ran out."

We broke through the surface of the planet, the diaphanous tube emerging on a plain surrounded by distant peaks. Around us could be seen the faint footprints of Kreath buildings. Above the horizon, a billion miles away, Antares was a tiny pinprick of light in the darkness.

The glass tube terminated in a large dome, the whole reminding me of the cul-de-sac shape of a thermometer. The guide escorted us to a viewing platform overlooking the plain.

She gestured. We stared.

Ten meters from the curving surface of the viewscreen, I made out a humanoid statue: an upright grey figure whose definition had been lost beneath the accretion of ice and surface regolith over the millennia. It appeared to be reaching out for something.

One of the crew members said, "An art work?"

Beside me, Ella whispered, "It is not a statue, Ed."

I looked at her. "Then what...?"

The guide went on, "The figures before us are the last two members of the Kreath race."

Only then did I see the figure beyond the first one. It was perhaps a hundred meters distant, a smaller, humanoid shape facing the first and reaching out with its arms.

The sight produced in me a sudden welling of sadness, and I felt my throat constrict.

"Experts have interpreted this moving tableau as the ritual suicide of a mother and daughter, the last of the Kreath. Xenologists think that it was a ritual of sacrifice to their gods, a means of appeasing their deity and so easing the way into the next life."

We took this in. Then a voice amongst us broke the pensive reverie. It was Karrie.

"Of course, that's merely an anthropocentric reading of the situation, surely?"

The guide blinked. "Ah . . . experts have suggested that the Kreath, as a deeply religious people without a proscription against suicide, regularly took this way out."

"But I read the literature back at the hotel," Karrie went on. "Isn't it true that the Kreath's written word is indecipherable? So therefore much of the Kreath's beliefs and customs are still opaque?"

"That is true to a certain extent," the guide rallied. "But the experts have pieced together enough evidence to put forward a working hypothesis."

So," Karrie said, gesturing to the mother and daughter tableau, "all this is theory?"

"Based on expert understanding," the guide parried.

Ella moved toward the dome, touched fingers to the sloping glass, and said, "The Kreath were a warm-blooded, humanoid people, and all the evidence is that they had emotions analogous to the human. I surmise that the xenologists' interpretation of the tableau has much substance in fact. Though as to whether these two were indeed the last individuals—"

Karrie interrupted, "And what would you know about emotions, Ella, since yours are simulated programs anyway?"

Ella turned to her and blinked, and I felt suddenly sorry for her—which was ridiculous, I reminded myself.

She said, "I have an intellectual awareness of the basis of all human emotions, Karrie."

My engineer just stared at Ella, then snorted and strode off.

"Ah . . ." said the guide, attempting to get things back on track. "I suggest a brief tour of the artifact museum before a break for lunch."

After lunch I took a nap in my room and awoke in the late afternoon, following the diurnal pattern we'd established aboard *A Long Way From Home*.

I decided to find Ella and see if she would like a drink before our evening meal.

As I approached Ella's room, the door opened and Karrie slipped out. "Oh!" She stopped short, almost colliding with me.

I said, "You were making up with Ella, Karrie?"

She looked at me contemptuously, thought about saying something, then shook her head and continued along the corridor.

I waited until she turned the corner, then rapped lightly on the door. It irised open and I stepped inside.

Ella was sitting stiffly by the viewscreen, spine vertical, and staring out across the surface of Nova Charon.

She didn't look around as I entered and sat on a foam-form a meter from her. I cleared my throat and said, "What did Karrie want, Ella?"

She turned those eyes on me, eyes which suggested so much humanity, but whose very warmth only served to mock the artificiality of the sentience behind them.

"She came to argue with me, Ed."

"Argue?"

"The essence of her opinion was that I, as an AI, had no grounds on which to theorize on the subject of emotion."

I shifted uncomfortably. I wanted to reach out and take her small hand. "What did she say, exactly?"

She blinked at me, "Exactly, Ed?"

I nodded.

"Okay," Ella said. She froze, eyes glazed, and opened her mouth slightly. What happened next sent a shiver down my spine. I'd never seen, or heard, anything like it.

Her lips did not move, but sound issued from between them. It was Karrie's voice, saying, *"Ah, there you are."*

Then came Ella's husky voice, replying, *"Karrie, hello. How can I help?"*

"Help?" Karrie said, *"You could help by walking out into the ice and freezing your transistors."*

*"I intend to walk out onto the ice. But I do not have transistors. And anyway, how would that in any way help you?"*

I stared at Ella, transfixed, as she replayed the conversation. Her face was eerily still, frozen.

*"So fucking literal, aren't you?"* Karrie had said. *"What do you know about emotions, anyway?"*

*"I am programmed with a comprehensive cache of emotional responses, and an intellectual understanding of the complexity of such emotions."*

"But do you feel?" Karrie asked.

"Feel," replied Ella, *"is a very subjective term. How might you define it?"*

"What do you feel, for instance, about Ed?"

Ridiculously, I colored at the sound of my name.

"Feel?" Ella's voice issued from her perfect ventriloquist's lips. *"Ed is the captain of the ship, my commander. I feel a debt of honor to Ed for hiring me, an obligation to discharge my duty to the best of my ability."*

"No friendship, affection?"

"I feel that Ed is my friend, yes. Affection. . . ."

"Yes?" Karrie said.

Ella responded, *"I am a Mark III, series XBα AI with an integral empirical self-programming sub-routine. I am, technically, a little over two years old. I am learning all the time."*

Then silence.

Ella turned her face to me, suddenly reanimated.

I nodded. "And that's it?"

"Karrie left immediately," Ella said, her lips moving this time.

All the more I wanted to take her hand. I said, "You're two, Ella, you're learning all the time. Don't let anything Karrie says make you feel . . ." I was about to say, "inferior," but instead said, "feel that you aren't valued, okay?"

I wanted to tell her that I felt affection for her, a warm feeling whenever I thought about her. And I told myself that these feelings had nothing to do with the fact that she looked like a beautiful twenty-year-old Venezuelan Indian, the somatype with which her manufacturer had issued her.

She nodded. "Very well, Ed."

"Anyway," I said, standing and clapping my hands breezily, "I was going along to the bar. I was wondering if you'd care to accompany me?"

She looked at me. "Yes," she said.

The bar overlooked the spaceport. *A Long Way From Home* stood on its akimbo

stanchions, nose in the air. A host of nano-mechs swarmed over it, while engineers in white protection suits jacked diagnostic coms into the ports that dotted its silver carapace.

I ordered a whisky. Ella sipped an orange juice.

Without my prompting, Ella said, "It's a paradox, Ed. I know so much about the universe out there, but little about the people with whom I spend my time."

"What would you like to know?"

She looked at me. "How long have you had the ship, Ed?"

"Ten years. Before her I had a rustbucket I picked up cheap from a yard out Acrab way."

"And Karrie has been with you how long?"

"Almost nine years now."

"You must be . . . close?"

I shook my head. "We're friends. She's a good engineer, one of the best."

Ella sipped her juice. "It is common for humans to have a mate, to marry. Have you ever married, Ed?"

"I . . . not married, no. While I was studying for my captain's papers, there was someone. We lived together a couple of years, before she left." I shrugged. "Since then . . ."

"Yes?"

I didn't want to tell Ella about the women I'd "known" in various ports across the Expansion. "There's been no one," I finished lamely.

She nodded. "Are you lonely?"

"Ah . . ." I thought about it. "No. I mean, sometimes I get a bit lonesome. Don't we all?" I shrugged. "But then I've got you and Karrie to keep me company, haven't I?"

She nodded, and I ventured, "And you? Do you ever get lonely?"

She looked at me. "Loneliness is a concept I have yet to experience, Ed. When I am alone I access my files, assimilate information, and learn."

Why did I want to gather her into my arms, tell her that everything would be all right, cherish her and protect her and lavish upon her all the love I knew I had within me? I cursed myself for an old fool and went to the bar for another drink.

When I returned, Ella said, "I've arranged with the authorities to leave the hotel complex. I will cross the plain where the figures stand, as I would like to inspect them more closely. At the same time I'll be monitoring my performance."

"Take care, Ella. I wouldn't want . . ."

She inclined her head and said, "I will return before any malfunction might occur, Ed. I will ensure that I don't put you to the expense of having to repair me."

I opened my mouth, but no words came.

A little later, she rose and said, "I have an appointment with a technician at exit seven in ten minutes."

"I'll come with you and watch, if you don't mind."

I could tell from the tech's manner that he'd never met an AI as beautiful as Ella, or anyone—human or AI—who'd wanted to cold test themselves outside the dome. He stared at her as she removed her flight jacket and passed it to me. She wore only her blue one-piece now, inadequate protection against the minus fifty degrees outside.

"You ready, miss?" the tech said as he keyed the code into the hatch.

Ella nodded, smiled at me and stepped through into the airlock. The tech closed the hatch behind her. "Take care," I said before the hatch sealed completely.

I watched her through a viewscreen in the hatch. She turned and raised a hand. Behind her, the outer hatch cracked and swung open ponderously. A cold wind raced in, lifting a strand of Ella's midnight hair.

She turned and walked outside.

"She knows the entry code," the tech said. He indicated a red panel beside the hatch. "Press that if there's an emergency and I'll come running, okay?"

He moved off down the corridor, and I took a few paces in the opposite direction so that I could watch Ella through the curving glass of the observation dome.

She looked tiny in that immense ice-grey landscape. The width of the plain, and the colossal night sky above, worked to reduce her to the size of a doll as she strode across the tundra towards the first of the alien figures.

I pressed my hands against the warm dome and stared at her, willing her to look up and back and see me there, watching her. I wanted her to know that I cared.

She didn't look back, but stared straight ahead as she marched up to the figure of the mother and halted.

The sight of Ella out there, so warm and vital in a landscape so inimical, pulled at something within me and I wanted to cry out to her to come back. I glanced at my watch. Just three minutes had elapsed since her exit.

I stared at her for the first sign of the effect of the cold, shivering limbs or blue flesh, but she didn't even hug herself. By now, a human out there would have been on his knees in frozen agony.

She stood and stared at the mother figure, for all the world as if she were staring at an exhibit in a museum.

"Quite some gal, our Ella," Karrie said.

I turned. Karrie was watching Ella through the glass, her expression neutral.

"What are you doing here?"

She didn't look at me. "Just making sure your investment doesn't come to any harm, Ed."

I let a second pass before I said, "I don't see Ella that way, Karrie."

Under her breath she said, "And haven't I noticed. . . ."

"And what," I said evenly, "do you mean by that?"

She laughed. "You think I haven't noticed the way you look at her, Ed? Sometimes I don't know whether to help you close your mouth or mop up your saliva."

"If you think I hired her because—"

"I think you hired her because we needed a co-pilot," Karrie said. "But since then you've let biology override your brain. Ed, for chrissake, it's an AI, a robot. Okay, it might look like sex-on-legs, but underneath that it's just a more powerful version of the ship's smartware core."

I said, "I don't think so, Karrie."

She just looked at me, pityingly.

"She might have started out as nothing more than a series of integrated circuits,"

I said, "but she's gained something over the past month."

"Something?" she sneered.

"Humanity," I said.

"Jesus Christ, listen to him."

"And," I went on, "that's why I'm concerned about what's happening to her out there."

She placed a hand on my shoulder with patronizing mock-solicitude. "Oh, Ed, don't be concerned. Look, if it freezes to death we just unfreeze it, reboot it, and it'll be as good as new. Or if its bod becomes a corpsicle, we just go back to the manufacturer and order another one—one with bigger tits, if you want."

"Fuck off, Karrie!"

"Grow up, Ed. I don't like seeing you act like a fourteen-year-old."

I closed my eyes briefly. "Just go away, Karrie. Leave me alone."

She held up palms as if halting a taxi-ing shuttle. "Hey, I'm going. I'm gone. Give the girl a big, warm hug when she gets back, okay?"



I turned back to the glass wall and stared out, my pulse racing.

As I watched, a strange thing happened out there on the ice. From her stiff, frozen posture, Ella moved, and I realized what she was doing. Her pose imitated that of the alien mother as it reached out in the universal gesture of supplication toward its stranded infant.

She held the pose for perhaps a minute, then moved suddenly and paced across the tundra toward the smaller alien form. She turned, facing the dome now, and held out both arms in a silent, physical echo of the petrified alien child.

I lifted a hand and held it against the screen, wanting her to see that I was still here.

I wondered what she was doing—if, as I guessed, she was attempting in her own way to empathize with the plight of the alien beings some ten millennia dead. . . .

Then she broke the posture, turned on her heel and began walking away from the dome. I checked my watch. She'd been out there for more than twenty minutes.

I wanted to call her back, tell her that enough was enough, that it was time to call a halt.

She walked and walked until she became a tiny sliver of sky blue against the blackness of space, and then she disappeared over the horizon and my heart began a labored thudding.

I waited, expecting at any second to see her emerge over the horizon and walk back towards the dome.

I looked at my watch again. Thirty minutes.

In five minutes, I told myself, if she isn't back by then I'll hit the alarm panel.

The minutes trickled past, with no sign of Ella on the horizon.

I could stand no more. I hit the alarm.

A minute later the tech came running, as good as his word, and Karrie was with him.

"Thought you couldn't give a shit?" I said.

She looked at me. "I don't like to see you like this, Ed. What happened?"

I explained the situation and the tech nodded. "There's a buggy in the garage along the corridor," he said. "There's a couple of suits in the buggy if we need to get out."

We were already hurrying along the corridor. We came to a hatch and the tech keyed the code. The door slid open and we stepped into a cavernous chamber.

Karrie halted on the threshold. "I'll stay here, Ed. She'll be okay, okay?"

I looked at her. "Do you care?"

"Ed," she said, "I care about you."

I turned quickly and climbed into the buggy beside the tech. Seconds later he revved the engine and nosed the vehicle from the garage. As it bucked over the frozen, uneven surface, I found an atmosphere suit and struggled into it.

"Where'd you say you last saw her?"

I indicated the horizon and we sloughed around, spraying a spindrift of ice crystals, and accelerated towards the point where Ella had vanished.

We climbed a slight rise and came to the crest. The buggy halted. I leaned forward, heart in my mouth, and scanned the desolate plain that stretched away for miles below us.

"There!" I cried.

She was a dot of color in an otherwise empty plain.

The tech gunned the engine and the buggy surged down the incline, kicking spray. My heart was thudding and I stared at the tiny figure, willing it to move. She was very still and, worse, I saw as we approached within a couple of hundred meters, she was on her knees.

So Ella was a state of the art AI, and what Karrie had said was right, wasn't it?

That whatever damage Ella suffered out here would be fine because she was, when all was said and done, merely a machine which could be repaired, rebooted. . . ?

But I knew that was garbage. Ella was a thinking, feeling intelligence, a being who learned from experience . . . a woman who strove to comprehend the emotions of others—even aliens—so that she might come to some understanding of what it was to be caring and compassionate, so that she might, ultimately, become human.

Or was I kidding myself?

The buggy approached her, and she was as still as the frozen aliens back on the plain, and a terrible thought occurred to me. What if the cold had really killed her, not just her body, but her mind; what if it had wiped the identity of the being I knew as Ella?

The tech braked the buggy and I cracked the hatch and leapt out. Even the atmosphere suit did nothing to ameliorate the first shock of the cold—it hit me like a wall of steel. I gasped a breath through the mask and stumbled over to Ella.

She was blue, her head flung back and her lips open, her eyes wide and staring, shattered with the effect of the extreme cold.

I held her, and she moved. She stood and came into my arms, and weeping I carried her to the buggy and laid her out as the tech revved the engine, turned and raced back towards the hotel complex.

I held her, willing life back into her. With her frozen eyes she stared at me blindly. “Ed . . .” She said, her lips moving slowly. She whispered, “Compassion . . . love . . . empathy . . . words, Ed. They mean . . . they have meaning. . . I was trying to...”

“Yes?” I said, cradling her.

“There’s something . . . something I didn’t tell you, Ed.”

I just stared at her, my heart racing. “What?” I said.

“What I told Karrie, back in my room. . . .”

“What?” I said again.

“We spoke for longer than I originally replayed to you.”

I said, “What did you say, Ella?”

She opened her mouth, and her lips didn’t move as she relayed the dialogue between herself and my engineer.

Ella had said, *“I am learning all the time.”* A pause, then, *“You asked if I could feel affection. Well, I am learning to feel affection, for Ed. I can respond. . . . If he evinces affection toward me, then maybe I can reciprocate.”*

I stared at the unmoving lips, the cheeks to which color was returning.

Karrie had made a strangled gasp, and then all was silent.

“Ella . . .” I said.

“I’m sorry, Ed,” she said now.

“Sorry?” I asked through tears of joy.

“For . . . for doing what I did. For stranding myself out here. You see . . .” she turned her head, her eyes staring at me, and I wondered if some sensors within her skull could apprehend me then, “you see, I wanted you to come for me.”

“Ella,” I said, pulling her to my chest and rocking with the motion of the buggy.

Two days later we lifted off from the cold testing port and orbited Nova Charon.

I lay in the pilot’s sling, and Ella climbed onto the flight deck and sat beside me. I glanced at her, something kicking in my heart.

She’d spent a day in the hospital on Nova Charon, then a further day in her cabin, plugged into a rejuvenation pod. We’d had no time alone to talk about what had happened out on the ice, or in the buggy on the way back.

Now I reached across to her, but she withdrew her hand.

“Ella?”

She said, "While I was in the rejuvenation pod, Ed, I ran a scrubbing program."

I stared at her. "What. . . ?"

"An erasure procedure," she explained. "The version of Ella before this one thought long and hard about what happened. 'T' wanted it banished. 'T' wanted all memory of what had happened out there on the ice erased from my cache. 'T' left a reminder to myself to tell you, Ed. 'T' said, 'sorry.'"

"Ella," I said, a chasm opening in my chest.

"And something else 'T' wanted to tell you. The old Ella said, 'To be human is to know pain.' Does that make sense, Ed?"

I stared at her, at her full lips, at her Indian eyes, at the sable fall of hair around her shoulders, and I nodded. "Perfect sense, Ella," I said, and turned to look through the viewscreen at the ball of ice that was Nova Charon. "I know exactly what she meant."

"Good," Ella said, and smiled.

Seconds later Karrie swung herself onto the flight deck and took her sling. "Main-drive engaged, auxiliaries stepping down."

"Shall I take us out of here, Ed?" Ella asked matter of factly.

"Lay in the co-ordinates for Epsilon Centauri," I said, and stared into the void as we phased out. ○

## WITHIN YOUR SHOES

So many  
crazies like that, arts-world hopefuls,  
breezing buoyantly heads higher  
than other downtown gadabouts.  
When people lift off in their socks  
I do my job, putting my shoes  
in theirs, keeping pavements pounded.  
The world keeps on going, that way.  
They have their flights and their friendly  
knocking into second stories  
and roofs . . . while batting-eyed coy sorts  
have their light goods to gab about  
when they, too, rise to go flitting.  
I hardly mind it: all their shoes . . .  
larger than mine. These housewives, bums,  
bankers, conveners of lunch clubs,  
optimists, stock-owners, buyers  
of rare vintage: all occupy  
such larger stations in this life  
my shoes slip smoothly into theirs,  
letting me clomp down vacant streets  
on their errands. Look upon me,  
I cry. Look! Normal, so normal!  
—for a change.

—Mark Rich



# THE MONSTERS OF MORGAN ISLAND

Sandra McDonald

**Sandra McDonald is from Revere, Massachusetts, home of the country's first public beach. She spent eight years as an officer in the Navy, and her final job was dorm mother for two thousand sailors. She has a master's degree in creative writing and currently teaches composition at three different colleges. Sandra has lived in Newfoundland, Guam, England, and five different states in America. Her third novel, *The Stars Blue Yonder*, will be published by Tor in July. The book is about love, duty, and intergalactic war. Her first story for *Asimov's* is inspired by the very lovely Kelleys Island, Ohio. She tells us, "Every summer I go there for a writer's retreat. There really is a quarry on the island, but no monsters live in it. I think."**

**T**his is what you need to know about Morgan Island: it measures four square miles in the middle of Lake Erie, includes eighteen miles of coastline, and contains at its center an enormous pit. This is where the monsters are hurled after being dragged off cargo ships and paraded along Division Street behind the American Legion marching band.

The townsfolk particularly enjoy these parades, which usually last no longer than twenty minutes. Mary Voltz, our heroine of sorts, likes the clang of the band's cymbals and the wafting smell of fresh popcorn. They relieve her otherwise monotonous days. The pit itself was once a quarry. Over the last century it has yielded enough limestone to build a thousand enduring gray-white churches, city halls and courthouses in the otherwise rusting cities along the shores of Lake Erie. The chiseled floors of the pit drop eighty feet below the surface of the island. The sheer walls are impossible to scale. Any drunken tourists who wander too close and stumble over the edges are irrevocably lost, and the Chamber of Commerce sends condolence letters to their families.

To understand Mary's story, you don't really need to know the entire history of the island's discovery and settlement by the immigrant Morgenthau family in the mid-nineteenth century. Or how many quarrymen's sons sailed off to fight patriotically in World War I and never returned. Or how the island wineries collapsed under the weight of infighting, backstabbing, and a tale of doomed lovers remarkably similar

to Romeo and Juliet, if the lovers were gay and middle-aged and only one was a virgin. Curious religious scholars could spend days in the Morgan Island library researching the bitter merger of the German Reformed Congregationalists with the Union Evangelicals and how both waged potluck dinner warfare against the ultimately triumphant Methodists, who had the strategic advantage of better recipes.

Other readers might enjoy Datus Voltz's classic history (unfinished, as are all the books here) of the Island House, which has stood for over one hundred and fifty years at the corner of Division and Water Streets in various incarnations as a general store, post office, boarding house, hotel, brothel, jail, and karaoke restaurant. Currently it's a pub that serves up beer, fried perch, and nachos with or without lowfat sour cream. The regular sour cream is better. On the walls hang old watercolor paintings of steamships on the lake and the windmills that once dotted Morgan Island's coastline. The steamships are blurry and the windmills all tilt away from shore.

As for Mary Voltz, she's a teenage girl who last summer worked five days a week in the kitchen of the Island House under the supervision of Sam and Paul Goodby, the beefy, hard-working owners. Sam and Paul wanted her to waitress but Mary's shyness and paranoia kept her trapped in a constant rotation between the sink, stove, and deep-fat fryer. Mary is so shy she has never looked into the eyes of any of her teachers. She hears scratching and scurrying noises behind walls, under floors, and from the septic tank under the Island House. She keeps track of all the noises in a cheap cardboard notebook held together by string. Her arms and legs constantly itch, forcing her to scratch until her skin bleeds. As her mother has noticed, she has no friends.

"She has friends," Mary's father sometimes protests, though he can't name any.

"She's a strange girl," Mary's mother replies. "We should have had more children."

Mary's lover, Little Bobby Rutherford, is a handsome and strong lad who works the tourist ferry that comes over twice a day from Sandusky. He buys the lunch special at the Island House whenever he can and never sees Mary except for glimpses of her strawberry blonde head through the kitchen's swinging doors. He is Mary's lover only in the sense that she calls up his image at night while stroking herself, and she often doodles his name in the margins of her *Diary of Unexplained Noises*. One day, she knows, they will marry in the Methodist Church across from the ferry landing. Little Bobby, for his part, has a girlfriend in Port Clinton who lives over a bait shop and whose mattress smells like mud.

The girlfriend got pregnant late last summer but arranged herself an abortion. No one needs to know that.

Come wintertime, when the lake freezes over, the cargo ships stop coming and the monsters remain penned up over on the mainland. Without tourists, ferries, or parades to liven the day, Morgan Island becomes a snow-white oasis of quiet and loneliness. The deer, rabbits, and foxes forage for food. The monsters in the pit forage as well, but only on each other. They never go silent, exactly, but their screams and moans are muffled by deepening layers of frozen corpses. The old brick schoolhouse clusters its forty students together to save on heating oil and private homes burn wood day and night. Around mid-March or so, after the Sandusky harbor master draws on his pipe, consults the weather reports, and declares the all-clear, a loud and cheerful horn over the water announces the opening of the season.

Which brings us back to Mary, who was in bed listening to scurrying noises beneath the floor when the horn broke through the crystal clear air. Her bedroom was one of a dozen rooms in the old Voltz mansion. By the time she pulled on her clothes and raced through the wide hallways, her parents were already donning their rabbit coats and beaver caps. Outside, townsfolk streamed toward the docks on foot, on bicycles, or in the little golf carts that had been charging all winter. Marching tunes

from the horns and tubas of the American Legion band greeted everyone as they neared the dock. Mary's teachers and classmates had already arrived, as had some of the spryer residents of the nursing home in their wheelchairs, and Sam and Paul Goodby from the Island House, which had only been open three days a week through the long winter. The Goodby boys were carrying bottles of whiskey in paper bags. Mary's parents had a bottle of Scotch and fine fat cigars. Mary had nothing to drink, nothing to smoke, not even a stick of chewing gum, as she watched the first red ship chug across the three miles of lake that separated the island from the mainland.

"Hope there's a lot of them," said Mrs. Elliot, who was the chief volunteer at the library and often chided Mary for her overdue books.

"Hope they don't smell too bad," said Mrs. Gordon, who coveted Mrs. Elliot's status as chief volunteer. The chief volunteer scheduled the library hours and regulated the subscriptions and was in charge of shelving all the books, none of which had endings. Library patrons on Morgan Island always had to invent their own conclusions, and none of them could ever agree on a proper one.

Mrs. Thomas, who thought both Mrs. Elliot and Mrs. Gordon were silly gits, said, "It's not the smell so much. It's those pathetic mewls they make."

It took twenty minutes for the cargo ship to arrive, and all the while excitement built among the crowd. Mary's father, who was a high-level administrator of the pit, greeted the ship's captain on the pier. They exchanged handshakes and ceremonial ribbons and made short speeches that Mary couldn't hear because of the sharp breeze that whipped words away. She regretted that she didn't put socks on before shoving her cold, cold feet in her boots, and that one of her gloves had a hole where her thumbnail poked through the leather.

Then the monsters were dragged out from the hold and Mary forgot her regrets. Like everyone else, she leaned forward to get a better look. First came inarticulate groans and cries, the clanking of chains, the slap of bare feet on steel decks. Then the wind brought forward their stench, sour and foul and vinegary. When they finally appeared, shambling along in manacles, the crowd murmured appreciatively. The monsters cringed in the bright sunlight, and stumbled against each other, and staggered on legs unsteady from confinement and weakness. Mary tried to imagine what it would be like to view the world from behind their watery eyes—searching for pity and never finding it, hoping for mercy when none would ever be had. It was probably a very cold feeling, empty and gnawing like years of hunger, the way Mary sometimes felt when she peered past the kitchen doors at the Island House and saw Little Bobby Rutherford talking to other people but never once glancing her way.

The dazed, pitiful monsters were herded down the pier and up Division Street. The crowd dutifully stayed behind the parade route lines as they shouted out curses and insults.

Sam Goodby yelled, "Damned beasts!"

"You're going to rot in the Pit!" added his brother Paul.

The marching band began playing, the horns and tubas slightly off-key. The monsters were prodded onto the mile-long route. Most of the town followed along, though some of the older folk opted to return to the nursing home, and the librarians went back to wage their petty wars between the stacks. Soon Mary was the only one left behind to witness the departure of the cargo ship. Two sailors retracted the gangplank while two others on the pier started to let go the lines. A fifth crewman appeared, dragging a monster child behind him.

"We found this one hiding," he said.

Another said, "Throw it in the water."

"Just like the trash," said another.

The monster child was a small thing, only five or six years old, filthy and scrawny.



Cowering from the crewmen and half-blind in the sunlight. Mary knew that he would drown if he went into the cold water wearing chains. She had seen Paul Goodby drown a feral kitten once in a barrel behind the Island House; he'd come back inside with scratches on his hand and a grim, satisfied expression.

She stepped forward.

"I'll take it to my father," she offered. "He runs the pit."

There was debate among the burly men, but not much. The sooner they departed and picked up more monsters for transport, the more money they'd make in the season. The monster child was passed down and the chain transferred to Mary's custody. He seemed as afraid of her as he was of the crew, which was silly. Mary considered herself harmless.

"This way," she said, coaxing him along the pier.

The parade had progressed far up Division Street. Mary pulled her monster down the alley behind the phone company building and into the woods past Titus Street. The forest floor was still crusted with snow in places, and sharp with sticks and rocks, and sometimes impassable with fallen trees and branches. The monster child whimpered only twice as Mary led him through a half-mile of thick brush. The marching band had gone silent, leaving only the sounds of bird twitter, the crunch of the ground under their feet, and occasional screams from the direction of the old quarry.

"I saved you," Mary told the monster child as they settled into the ruins of the old Croft winery. Most of the original buildings had been reduced to stone foundations, but the tiny stone cellar still had three walls and a rough ceiling. Mary was stymied by the question of where to affix the chain. She settled for threading it through an iron loop where shelves once hung. "After they throw you into the Pit, you can't climb out. You wouldn't want that, would you?"

The monster child huddled into itself in the corner, peering at Mary through a too-long fringe of hair. His eyes were small but bright. She asked, "What's your name?" but remembered what her mother had always said. Monsters didn't have names or language or souls. "Never mind. It doesn't matter. I can pick a name for you. Are you hungry? I can get food. If you stay here and don't go anywhere."

He gave no indication of understanding. But Mary's father said monsters understood more than they ever wanted you to know. On other points he was vaguer, contradictory. They were dumb but clever. Stupid but cunning. Powerless but dangerous, which was why they had to be cast down. You couldn't let monsters run around in libraries or restaurants or the big department stores they had over on the mainland, which Mary had only seen once.

She made her voice low and hard. "If you wander off, they'll catch you. Your only chance is if you stay here and be very quiet, and hide if anyone comes by. But don't hide from me. I'm your protector, okay? I'll bring you food and blankets but you have to be good, or my father will find out and dump you in the pit."

No reply, no acknowledgment. Just those too-bright eyes, peering at her. Mary chewed on her bottom lip. The thrill of having her own monster was already wearing thin, and it wasn't even lunchtime. She pulled herself off the floor and dusted dirt off her pants.

"This was a bad idea," she said casually. "I better tell them where you are."

The monster child made a noise in the back of his throat. He lurched forward a little, as if in supplication.

That was better. Mary smiled.

The secret of her very own monster made her feet light as she hurried home. Her parents weren't back from the pit yet, so she took the opportunity to pilfer the pantry of things her mother wouldn't miss—a sleeve of crackers, a jar of olives, some apples that had brown spots on them. The discard box in the laundry room yielded a

sweater which no longer accommodated her father's pot belly. Mary stuffed her bounty in a spare pillowcase along with stray socks, some soap and toothpaste, and a musty old blanket from her bedroom closet. The monster child was her responsibility now, and she would do the very best she could.

The next day was a regular school day. Mary couldn't bring the stuffed pillowcase into the junior-senior classroom and so she stashed it beforehand. All day she waited impatiently while steam heat clanged through the radiators and the clock hands dragged in ever-slower circles. She was convinced that her monster had perished during the night or made good an escape. Anxiety made it very hard to swallow down lunch, and afterward she had a headache. There were eight children in the room and hardly anyone paid attention to her except for Mrs. Hanover.

"Mary, you've been fidgeting all day. Is something wrong?"

"No, ma'am," Mary mumbled.

"Are you feeling ill?"

"I feel fine, ma'am."

"We could read *Robinson Crusoe* again, and decide if he ever gets off the island," Mrs. Hanover said generously.

Mary shook her head until her thick bangs hid her eyes. "No thank you."

After the final bell rang she hurried off down Center Street and turned left at the Williams house, still boarded up for winter. The pillowcase was behind the woodpile, right where she had left it. She turned in a circle, looking for spies, but this was a street where only summer people lived. Mary dashed into the woods and made her way past the creek to the winery. Her boots slipped and she nearly banged her knee on a fallen tree trunk, but she kept hurrying, pushing onward, until the old Croft winery came into view like a sacred temple.

"It's me!" she called out. "Don't hide!"

The monster child was still huddled in the corner of the old cellar. Mary couldn't be sure that he had even moved since yesterday. His eyes tracked her as she fashioned herself a chair from an old tree stump. Carefully she withdrew her treasures. "These are socks, see?" she said. "For your feet. Are your feet cold? Catch!"

She tossed the rolled-up socks his way. They bounced off his scrawny legs and rolled a little in the half-thawed mud. After a moment, one curled arm and clenched fist reached tentatively, carefully outward. The other hand, attached by rusty manacles, followed. He snatched the socks and clutched them against his chest.

Pleased, Mary said, "And these are hard-boiled eggs from breakfast. Do you know how to peel them? I like when you can lift the membrane and shell in as few pieces as possible. It's like a game."

He took the eggs the same way he took the socks. Mary tried to hand things directly to him, but her outstretched hand made him whimper and withdraw. She could only toss things to his corner or put them close and watch him jerkily reach forward. He was hoarding the gifts, not using them—not pulling the socks on his feet, not eating the eggs.

"It doesn't do any good to just collect things," she said. "Even I know that. I have two hundred books. But I can only finish one at a time. Does that make sense?"

The monster child shivered and didn't answer.

"You have to put the blanket around you," Mary said, pantomiming. "You can't be that dumb, right? You know what a blanket does."

Surely he did. He obviously knew what clothes were for—his own were tattered and caked with grime but still he wore them—and it occurred to her that he was being stubborn.

"Put it on or I'll take it back," she warned.

Slowly he pulled the blanket over his shoulder.

Mary nodded. "Just like that."

She left him the food and the sweater and everything else she'd collected. It would have been nice if he thanked her but her father said they couldn't talk like normal people and so it was silence she got, and a slight squint of the eyes when she rose up to go home. She took a different route home than the one she'd used to get there. It wouldn't do any good to wear a path in the winter woods, after all. She emerged just north of the post office and made a point to circle around the parking lot so Mr. Johnson the postmaster couldn't see her from his small square window.

Within a week she had decided her monster child needed a name and so she picked Squeak, the sound he began to make whenever she tossed food at him—heels of bread loaves and leftover pizza and fish sticks her father never liked for dinner anyway. Squeak started making other noises as well—a keening sound when he rocked back and forth, a scratch-scratch noise when he dragged his ragged fingernails across the stone walls. No words, though. No questions or answers from him, no mimicking, nothing that showed he wanted to learn. She considered him unambitious at best. But he had uses.

"Pretend you're Bobby," she told him. "And one day you come for lunch, and you see me, but you're too shy to say a word. So I'll have to do it for us both. I'll say, 'Hello, how's the food today?' Does that sound okay? I'll put my hand on my hip here, and tilt my head so the light catches my eye. Would that work?"

His wide unblinking eyes didn't change. Mary nevertheless thought she detected negation.

"Maybe I could say something else," she said.

As the days accumulated into weeks and spring slid toward summer she realized what a burden she'd taken on for herself. Having to bring Squeak food every day was annoying. Her mother was beginning to hint that Mary had an eating disorder because so much food was going missing from the pantry. As the tourist season picked up the Goodby brothers needed her to work after school, and she couldn't very well traipse around the woods at night with only a flashlight. On those days Squeak just had to go hungry. It was disheartening that he never even tried to communicate with her, or made any tiny gifts of twigs or feathers to show how he appreciated her efforts.

On the bright side, she was the only person on all of Morgan Island who could truthfully claim to own her own monster, and surely that made her special and distinct? Everyone else had to content themselves with meeting the cargo ship or marching along with the parade or watching, from the special viewing area, as the monsters were prodded onto a plank above the Pit and then sent plummeting into the writhing masses below.

She decided that her secret would have more cachet if she told someone. Not her parents, obviously. Her father would take one look at Squeak and have him hauled away. Her mother would shriek and maybe faint. Mary couldn't tell her teachers or classmates, none of whom she trusted. She couldn't tell the warring librarians. She considered Paul and Sam Goodby, but in the end there was only Little Bobby himself, who had returned at the start of the season and was as handsome as she remembered.

In a different tale than this one Mary might have gained new confidence and new social skills through her interactions with Squeak, but in this one she had learned nothing since the day she dragged him into the woods. She was still the same shy, itchy girl who heard noises and dreamed of a life she would never lead. Never could she have mustered the courage or confidence to approach Little Bobby on her own. Luckily for her, the Goodby brothers each year hosted a graduation party for the high school, and this year Mary benefited from being included along with the three other graduates.

She had never sat on the high stools at the wooden bar before, never been treated

as a special and valued customer. It was a novelty to be toasted with soda and showered with confetti. Half the town turned out—any excuse for a party, after all—and there was Little Bobby, looking for the daily special, his ball cap angled jauntily on his thick blond hair and his expression slightly confused as rock music pounded through the speakers.

Mary slid off her stool to be nearer to him. Her arms and thighs itched under the cling of her summer dress. She imagined herself gliding close to Bobby, cocking her head in an enticing way, putting a seductive smile on her face. No, not seductive. Intriguing. Offering him the chance to share what no one else could give him, and then he would see her wit and charm and bravery, and how could he resist her?

Courage held tight, she stepped closer to him.

Hello, she would say. Thank you for coming to our party.

My pleasure, he would say. Aren't you the fabulous Mary Voltz?

She could already hear the words in the air, like shimmery raindrops about to splash down and blossom into flowers. But as she took another step he edged sideways to grab a slice of cake. His evasive maneuver couldn't have been an accident; surely he had seen her in the corner of his eye. He cracked a wide smile at Susan Harper, the class valedictorian.

"Hey," he said. "Great cake."

Mary's heart froze up in her chest. Susan had good skin and glossy hair. Her father owned several cargo ships, and her family lived in a house even bigger than Mary's. She gazed at Little Bobby with her pink lips curved knowingly. She tilted her head the exact way that Mary had planned on. She smiled the same smile.

"You like chocolate?" Susan asked.

Little Bobby gazed down at her with one hand confident on the neck of his beer bottle. "Love it."

The two of them might as well have been standing together in an open field of sunlit daisies, goddamn bunny rabbits frolicking at their feet, and not in the crowded back room of a building that had once been a brothel and jail.

"Mary," her father said, bumping up against her elbow. "More cake?"

She dashed out the back door and tore off into the woods, heedless of who might see her from their summer home windows or call the island police to report a trespasser. The heels of her graduation shoes sank into the forest floor. She lost the left shoe in a tangle of vines. It didn't matter; she didn't care. She needed Squeak. She needed him to give back just a little of all she'd given him by commiserating over that bastard Little Bobby and that bitch Susan Walker. She needed his sympathy and understanding.

But he was gone.

His corner of the abandoned cellar was empty. The chain that she had looped high on the wall hung empty, two blood-crusted manacles twisted open. Mary stared at the metal and at the ground where he had been sitting, but no clues presented themselves as to where he had gone, or even why he had left. The blanket she'd given him was crumpled in the dead leaves, no longer required. The soap and toothpaste had also been left behind.

"Squeak!" she yelled. "Come back! You'll get lost!"

She feared that he had been discovered and taken by trespassers in the woods. Would they drag him to the Pit and throw him off the edge, or wait until the next parade, or torture him on their own, like some evil children did to stray cats and dogs? He couldn't talk. He couldn't tell anyone she was the one who'd been assisting him all these months, in clear violation of the law. But maybe they could figure out where his socks had come from, or her father would identify the shirt she'd finally convinced him to pull over his rags. There could be a million tiny clues on him that would lead everyone back to her with their fingers pointing in accusation.

Mary felt sick. She vomited up cake and ginger ale and chocolate chip cookies, and then kicked dirt over the mess in case the police studied the saliva with scientific instruments and traced it back to her. On her hands and knees she sifted through Squeak's corner, looking for clues as to where he'd gone.

Her fingers found a loose stone at the base of one wall. When she pulled it free, she saw a small tunnel burrowed into the small hill behind the cellar. It was too tiny for her to crawl into but it was perfect for someone Squeak's size. The walls of it had been gouged by hand and broken fingernails. The excavated dirt, she discovered, was hidden under piles of leaves within stretching distance of Squeak's chain.

He had burrowed away like a rat.

Like a monster.

Mary sat back, rubbing her arms. Her blue graduation dress was dirty and ripped. She could feel debris and twigs heavy in her hair. Her stomach felt heavy though there was nothing left in it, and she had a headache. After a little while she pulled herself up. The forest was a dark green mystery around her.

"Goodbye, Squeak," she said.

She trudged home with her remaining shoe clutched in hand, apologized to her parents for rushing away from the Island House in a temper, and told them nothing about Squeak. He was still her secret, after all.

Which is how her story ends.

You expected more?

The story of Morgan Island stretches back millions of years in limestone fossils and memories of glacial expansion, and hurtles forward millions of year toward the day when the planet itself burns away into extinction. You don't need to know how many nights Mary Voltz lay in her bed cursing Little Bobby Rutherford and Susan Walker and listening to scratch-scratch noises through the floor. You don't need to know how she lost her virginity to Paul Goodby on a warm summer night on the hard kitchen floor of the Island House. Paul was as gentle as could be given his state of intoxication, but there was more blood than either of them expected. You don't need to know how Mary's parents died within six weeks of each other during a winter when the weight of frozen ice pulled down all the telephone and power lines, or how she eventually took over the Island House and ran it more or less successfully until the monsters stopped coming.

Genocide, the world courts said. Armies fired guns at one another until treaties were signed. The monsters still alive in the pit were freed and repatriated, and the tourist trade dried up. Of Morgan Island now there are only abandoned homes, shuttered gift shops, a boarded-up retirement home, and streets overgrown with weeds. The wind through the trees is more melodic than the marching band ever was. All the windows in the school are broken, and the library contains nothing but empty shelves and piles of ashes.

But this is Morgan Island, where the stories never had any endings. Choose your own. Choose this one, if you please.

After Mary discovered Squeak's tunnel, she realized what she'd been hearing under the island all those years. She told no one. She kept silent when the first of the townsfolk started disappearing—the volunteer librarians on a dark and stormy night, the postmaster Mr. Johnson after he went to meet the mail boat, Paul Goodby when he took the garbage out to the alley. She didn't confess even when her own parents disappeared on their way home from supper at the Methodist Church. Instead she knocked on all the floors of the old Voltz mansion until she found a place that sounded hollow, and was waiting patiently on the night Squeak climbed out of it.

He'd grown bigger over the years. Stronger and broader, streaked with dirt, his face and hands hardened. His army of fellow monsters looked brutal as they crowded

out of the tunnel behind him. But she recognized his wide unblinking eyes, and knew it was no coincidence that he'd come to her. She'd described her house to him more than once during their months together.

"Help me escape," she begged now. "And I'll help you."

He had planned on killing her, but the monsters needed some townsfolk if they were going to succeed in storming the ferry, invading the mainland and taking over the world. Which is what they did, of course. Years of planning and suffering in the pit led to rebellion, as it often does, and pride and conceit led to downfall, which is also well-known in this world and many others.

As for Mary? On good days Squeak lets her kneel beside him in the wheelhouse of his cargo ship. The sun shines on their faces and the fresh air of Lake Erie is a relief after the stench below decks. The cities along the shore have surrendered or been conquered, and now fly black flags of solidarity. Squeak likes the way the flags snap in the wind, and Mary enjoys the stories the monsters tell of their adventures ashore.

Yes, she understands the monster language now, having had years to listen to Squeak and his crew. Such tales of heroism and persistence! At night she tries to share her admiration, but Little Bobby turns away morosely in his own chains, and Susan Walker stopped responding after she lost both her pretty legs to gangrene.

The cargo ship sails on and on, off the map. Into legend. Heroes at the helm and monsters in the hold. That's the ending Squeak chooses. He was always the real hero of this story, anyway. Do you need to know any more? O

## SPLIT DECISIONS

The Navajo say everything has two forms  
The bluebird, the rock, the thorn  
Yet that which is indivisible, whole  
                                determines the true path  
Which is relentless—

The split decisions of time and space  
Fragment like photon waves  
                                offering too many choices  
Narrowing, zen-like, into this moment

As my eyes narrow against the sun  
Restricting the flood of photons  
The gritty wall tells me something new about him,  
Something his clothes and walk do not know

He has fled through doors  
Two doors. Did he exit through both,  
Passing through two slits at once,  
Like one photon occupying two places  
At the same time?



If I follow through one door,  
Will the other cease to be,  
Like a particle's virtual twin?  
The indivisible cannot pass through both at once  
It follows that I can choose the wrong door  
The door to nowhere; if I choose one,  
My alternate self the one that's left  
The other has never existed

I am the one who lives, trudging a dusty  
Trail on a mountain lost in clouds  
Its feet buried in time  
Its summit only a probability

The earth is moist from recent rain, yet I find  
No evidence of the figure I pursue—  
His passage must be marked with tracks  
Unless he still occupies the wave state

I have journeyed in the wave state myself  
But it's disorienting, one suffers  
Multiple viewpoints simultaneously—  
All perceptions seem so insignificant

I have followed the trail to the summit  
Where restless clouds hide and reveal  
The stony trail, my fading footprints  
The only marks upon it  
The land below the cloud blanket  
A slate on which to write  
A world / a life / a history  
Or nothing at all

—Kendall Evans and David C. Kopaska-Merkel

# SAILS THE MORNE

Chris Willrich

Chris Willrich lives with his family in the San Francisco Bay Area, where he works as a children's librarian. He's best known for his sword-and-sorcery stories, which have appeared in *F&SF*, *Flashing Swords*, and *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, but he enjoys writing science fiction adventures, too. His third story for *Asimov's* combines mystery and suspense with aliens and space travel, and is certainly an example of the latter sort of tale.

The morning that *Eight Ball's* klaxon blared, heralding the disciples of universal night, her captain had gone fishing.

Gesar Chin—friends called him “Brick”—was a relic even for a long-hauler, and he appeared almost stony astride his fishing pole, like a terra cotta warrior with a patina of grease. His only movement was to chew the betel nuts that for all twenty-fourth century dentistry still left his teeth bloody red. Each chew bobbed him slowly in freefall, like an ebbing pendulum. Just an hour out of hibernation, he still ached. And one thing he'd learned in all his dubious careers was to take the morning slow.

*Never mind you hate the Gwai Lo*, he told himself. *Deep breaths. Remember what Wigness said, just steer the ship. Keep a grip.*

So he was eyeing a fat golden pictorial velcroed open among the charts (2,000 *Years of Illuminated Manuscripts*) and a fat silvery fish drifting beyond the big transparent dome, when the alarm screamed as of murder, and the lighting shifted red. The cod appeared to swim in blood.

“Aiya,” Brick muttered, still chewing his nut, reflexively touching the knife at his belt. “What the hell?” he croaked. But the cod couldn't answer. He shot it a disgusted look.

Like all *Eight Ball's* crew except Kybernetes, the ship's resident Brain, he wore a two-dimensional rendering of a black sphere from an obscure Earth game. It incorporated a radiation dosimeter and a link to the ship's network. He tapped it and said, “Captain here. Make it good.”

“Brick,” came the cool voice of the woman he knew only as Dagger Meza, his first mate. “Kyb's spotted an object in an intersecting solar orbit.”

This time Brick stopped chewing. “Intersecting?”

“Close enough. It's two hundred eighty thousand clicks away now. We'll pass within a hundred sixty thousand.”

Brick swore louder this time. The thing was already closer than Earth was to its moon. “Uncharted iceball?” he said. “Or a ship?”

“The betting pool's going with *ship*, sir,” came the glum tones of Kybernetes.

"I want to have a look," Brick said, "with my own 'eyes.'"

Martian by birth, he had the winsome but weathered look of those Sino-Tibetans who first walked the red world without masks. He also bore the hoarse voice and dark goggles of old spacers whose thyroid got too many Grays and whose eyes got too many gees.

"We figured you would," Kyb said.

Brick sighed and spat into a self-sealing cup. Then he keyed the ascent. The hatch below snapped shut. Motors whirred; silver shapes darted off, including the one that got away.

The fishing bubble doubled as the astrogation bubble, even if *Eight Ball's* specs had it the other way around. *Eight Ball's* denizens—four fresh-thawed baseline humans, three revived aliens, and the ever-vigilant Kybernetes—dwelled in a titanium sphere about thirty-five meters across, itself sealed in a shell of carbon-steel-caged cold water, five meters thick. The water had many uses: cosmic ray shielding, heat dissipation, backup propellant. You could even drink it. But it was Brick's innovation to stock it with Pacific cod, and to rig the bubble atop the inner sphere with a rod and reel, its handle just above the navigation charts.

The bubble rose like an elevator car in some Earthly undersea habitat. A circular panel irised upon the grey wall of the outer shell. Beyond was a special membrane that peeled away as the bubble peered through. Now the fishing rod dangled into space. The Milky Way sparkled beyond the orange lozenge of the lure. Stray water drops froze and scattered to join the stars, or drifted like snow onto the white hull around the bubble.

*Eight Ball* matched her name. Her outer shell was a black sphere studded with cargo modules, sensors, and heat radiators, but at the bow lay a circle of white paint threaded with a black infinity symbol. A docking port crouched inside the starboard loop; the astrogation bubble peeked from inside the port loop. Smirking dirtsiders supposed the black paint a nod to stealth, sabotaged by the white patch. In fact, both white and black were affectations. A ship's heat glowed more livid to sensors than candy stripes. Barring odd "terrain" like dense convoys or the close vicinity of the Sun, stealth in space was a myth.

The principle worked both ways, however. No one should have gotten the drop on *Eight Ball*.

Grunting, Brick tapped his goggles and blinked, and the lenses responded. These were not true corrective glasses, but rather flat computer panels of a sort antiquated by direct neural links. The uniform black of the goggles absorbed photons while a computer perched above Brick's nose tailored displays for his acceleration-damaged eyes. In effect, everything he saw was a simulation. When he glanced at his pictorial, for instance, with its swirling rendition of the Chi Rho page of the *Book of Kells*, the Greek letters denoting Christ filled with shimmering intricacies like some ecclesiastic fractal set; and he could choose to magnify the image, tease out the miniature animals and fanciful beasts and nearly as fanciful humans tucked within the dizzying Celtic knotwork, or delve deeper, examining the fine veining of the calfskin parchment so faithfully reproduced, or call up an annotated gloss about the original rich palette of pigments, such as iron gall, orpiment, and lapis lazuli.

He loved such explorations. But now he must look away, from illumination into darkness.

Graphical overlays crisscrossed Brick's view of the stars. A green dot on a green line marked their destination, Kuiper Belt Object Quaoar, eight hours away and crawling with alien *Gwai Lo*.

A red line, thicker to indicate nearness, slashed at a slight angle across the green. Upon it pulsed a red dot, Kybernetes' bogey.

Brick grunted, squinted, rapped, mixing the goggles' information with Kyb's data. He resolved a fuzzy, shadowy image. Soon he could guess its true shape, slender and tri-winged.

"Huh," he said. "Very Flash. Gordon, that is."

"Captain?" Dagger's miniature face popped up in one corner of Brick's display—or rather lack of face, since she always left her quarters shrouded in dark robe and cowl.

"Looks so out of place it's crazy, I mean. Might as well be a sailing ship."

Dagger's image nodded. "We thought it might be an atmosphere-launched missile, but out here, that makes no sense."

Brick scratched his nose beneath his goggles. "Probably a *yacht*," he decided with surprise. It was hard to surprise him these days.

But it must be so. Any interplanetary vessel so sleek must be a toy of Rollers, plutocratic youth cruising the inner system before becoming Loaded, discarding flesh for electronic immortality. Even SolGov would bow to the economic wisdom of using different craft for atmospheres than for deep space.

"Who the hell is this?" Brick snarled, his thoughts now burning to his cargo. "How did he sneak up on us?"

"Working on the who-the-hell-he-is, sir," Kyb said, her tone sparking with anger. At Brick? More likely at the Roller. There was no pop-up image of Kyb's face, because she no longer had one. Brain-hood was a cheaper brand of immortality than Loading, and many of the elite sponsored the cybering of Brains in return for indentured servitude. That was Kybernetes' story, until Brick had bought her freedom. But there remained the worry her Roller employer had left hidden overrides behind.

Maybe Kyb worried too.

"They *can't* have chased us from the inner system," Kyb was saying. "It can be done, but we'd have seen it." Brick nodded. If life support was a candle, ship's drive was a bonfire. Kyb continued, "So I would guess it was manufactured out this way. I'm searching our onboard registry. As for how sensors missed it, there's almost no heat signature. I only spotted it because I got into a paranoid mood, and checked for star occultations."

"Let's hear it for moods," Brick said. "Huh, no heat. A *robot yacht*?" Its appearance might be a ruse.

"Maybe, yes. But even for a robot it's cold. If it wasn't coming so close, I'd wonder if it was a derelict."

Mercury "Merc" Jones, the flashily named engineer with the unassuming title Loadmaster, popped up in another corner of Brick's display. "Been thinking about that," said Merc, a thirtyish-looking black man leathered by years of solar exposure at Mercury's Quicksilver Scrapyards. He bore a toothmark scar on his temple from the *Eight Ball* crew's notorious barfight on Titan, where Merc accidentally switched his raw-egg drink with an Ixion's bark juice. Though younger, the peripatetic Loadmaster had stripped and jury-rigged more ships than Brick had ever seen. "Could be running in some kind of dormant mode, you know . . . like how old space probes carried little batteries, enough to run a few instruments, not enough to easily spot. Some late twenty-first century models could run damn cold. Sneaky."

"Assuming the ship is *not* built with alien stealth," Dagger said.

"Huh." In her own way, Dagger mistrusted *Gwai Lo* as much as Brick did. One of the Lagrange space colonists, her home habitat had been an economic basket case since the Contact Crash, and while unlike Brick she wasn't alive then, L5 still suffered.

(He'd never forget her fighting off that Ixion in the Titan barfight, wielding her tequila bottle with all the passion and precision of some drunken yet dragon-slaying Joan of Arc. Even now it generated thoughts unbecoming of a captain.)

He respected her worries. The Ixions in particular had boycotted Quaoar's All-System Exposition in disdain for the smelly tree-beasts who nominally owned the system in question. Brick could imagine the ravenous, slimy, two-meter wasp-snakes vaporizing *Eight Ball* for emphasis. Still, the ships of the Kuiper Belt's great colonial Powers, and even lesser lights like the Erisians, were as distinctive as works of art. Why would aliens go slumming on a human yacht?

"Okay," Brick said. "For now we assume they're human pirates. Or at least human-built pirates." He sighed. "We'd better inform Ambassador Yee."

"We going to launch her at them?" Merc said.

"She's SolGov," Brick said, "and we've got an obligation to keep her informed. Anyway, we opted for a laser cannon, not a missile bay. Put her on."

"Pirates?" Chodon Yee sputtered presently. Like Brick, the Special Ambassador for Inter-species Conferences was Martian-Tibetan-Chinese, but the resemblance ended there. An icy beauty, she seemed eternally young, with a talent for gathering attention like Jupiter gathered moons. If he hadn't seen her in the flesh before hibernation, Brick would have thought the sleek image in the pop-up display some virtual avatar. She just didn't quite seem real.

"Robot pirates," Dagger said.

"Ahr, buzz, ahr, matey," Brick said. There was silence for a moment, before everyone ignored him. His crew could tell when he was talking as the captain, and when he was talking as the Old Coot. Yee probably thought he sounded no more stupid than usual.

"I trust you have an explanation for this?" she said.

"Piracy in deep space is difficult," Kyb said, "because the detection ranges are so long. But this ship may have a workaround. Imagine a controlling AI . . . or Loaded personality . . . aboard a minimally powered ship. Give it drones to recover swag. We're highly visible even coasting, because of the heat from life support. Our robot pirate doesn't have that problem. And so now they're here, well within weapon range."

"I don't want a lecture on pirate tactics," Yee said. "I want to know how you ignored this possibility. I have never been comfortable with SolGov's use of private haulers. This only vindicates my concerns."

Brick chomped a fresh betel nut. He could almost hear Merc sharpening his knife. He said quickly, "This is somewhat unprecedented, excellency." He remembered SolGov representative Wigness assuring him the threat from piracy was nil. He wished he could bring Wigness here now. "What little space piracy goes on, goes on closer to the Sun—"

"You shame your ancestors with excuses. No doubt you bring great negative karma upon this ship. You are certain it's hostile? Have you tried hailing?"

"Madam." Brick drummed his fingers upon the image from the *Book of Kells*. "It's a ship close enough to spit on. That can't be an accident, and I'm not taking chances. Our only advantage right now is that it *might* not know we know."

Kyb tried to rescue him. "We do have another advantage, Captain. No life support means low heat profile, but only if they're powered down . . . they'll have to go through a power-up before threatening us with more than bad thoughts."

Yee said, "Then there may be time for Quaoar to help us. We should alert Ambassador Wintergrue."

Merc laughed. "Quaoar never answers maydays, excellency." The Loadmaster wasn't bothering to keep the scorn out of his voice. Merc disliked officialdom, piety, and dirtsiders, and Yee wrapped all three up in one glossy package. Brick gathered Merc had spent years tangled with some well-heeled, Mars-based cult, the Moddies maybe, or a human branch of the Night Readers, and this had a lot to do with his

love for the outer system. "For that matter," Merc went on, "they're so fussy about approaches they'll blast anything that assumes a collision course, even by accident. Fun people."

"Even with Wintergrue on board?" Yee scoffed.

"Let's ask," Brick said.

"Even with me on board," the retiring Quaoran Ambassador confirmed a minute later, its translator affecting an easy, mellow tone. "It is simply that we don't fool around with high relative velocities. At spacecraft speeds, accidental collisions are hard to distinguish from deliberate attacks. So we don't. Too bad for me."

Brick bit hard on a betel nut, looking at the Quaoran's grotesque image in his display, so at odds with its urbane artificial voice.

A Quaoran—the name was a convenience, for its true home was light-years away—was like a ten-legged tarantula, stuck to the bottom of a meter-wide balloon composed of layers of spider-silk and crisscrossed with tiny, scampering young (plus robot versions of same), the whole works spray-painted white. Quaoran language was ideographic, formed of red threads dropped onto the white by those mind-linked (some sources said *enslaved*) younglings. So strange squiggles coiled around Wintergrue's gasbag like bloody calligraphy, the Quaoran analog to his speech.

"Now, despite the fact that Quaoar will be no help," Wintergrue continued, "I *am* curious why these pirates would choose to intercept when we're relatively close. They could have caught you in hibernation."

Brick frowned at the image. One of the child-spiders up top was looking quite big, almost as large as the parent.

"Maybe they've got a buyer at Quaoar," Merc was saying, "you know?"

Dagger added, "And when piracy does happen, sometimes the raiders want an awakened target that will jettison cargo."

"Excellency," Brick put in, "pardon me for prying. But are you in danger of *tip-ping*?"

The amount of red writing on the Quaoran gasbag tripled, but Wintergrue's mild voice said simply, "All my young are leashed, Captain Chin. My eldest will be cut loose at Quaoar soon, before any psychotic takeover can take place. Thank you for your concern."

Brick wanted to trust Wintergrue; horrific appearance aside, it was tolerable company, for a *Gwai Lo*. But Quaorans whose mind-linked young rebelled could become irrational. Sometimes the rebel could even masquerade as the parent . . .

"You're wasting time, Captain," Yee said. "What are you going to do about this pirate? How are you going to ensure the safety of the holy relic?"

"Holy relic?" Merc said.

"What my first mate suggested," Brick said quickly. "Drop and run."

"You'd jettison the cryptbox?" Yee exclaimed.

"No," Brick snapped. "I'm talking about the outboard cargo. Kona coffee for the Quaorans. Redwood bark for the Ixions. That sort of thing."

"Cryptbox?" Kyb said.

*Thanks, Yee, Brick thought. But I guess our pirates already know.* The box was the likely target. Even as voracious as the Ixions, say, were for Earth plant matter (glutinous omnivores though they were, the very scent of Earth *meat* could set them vomiting—he'd lost a good shirt to green splatter at that Titan bar), tree bark hardly justified piracy. But at least *Eight Ball* could shed mass.

To Kyb he said, "Later," before tapping his badge for a shipwide announcement. "This is the captain. We've detected a probable hostile. All passengers to the storm cellar. All passengers to the storm cellar." He killed the announcement. "Wait for it . . ."

The Orcan Ambassador to Quaoar (reassigned from Earth) cut in. Brick had run



out of corners to stow the pop-up images, so it appeared beside Yee's. By contrast to her chilly composed gaze, it was giving him the finger.

The Ambassador, whose name translated as Oddsgod, traveled in an aquarium about the size of Wintergrue's gasbag, covered with extendable manipulator-claws. It made Brick think of one of H.G. Wells' Martian war machines, with a fishbowl on top. The fishbowl's interior frothed with smoky-looking water. Sometimes tendrils emerged into view, brushing the crystalline wall. The Orcan itself, Brick knew, dangled from an icepack mounted to the aquarium roof. It resembled an inverted blue willow tree with thousands of diminutive worms for branches, little eyeballs near the tips. Those blue tendrils were quite dextrous, so much that Oddsgod was able to make human-readable doodles just by shoving them against the crystal wall. Oddsgod's latest masterpiece looked like a human hand with its middle finger jutting up.

"Screw that! You're not hiding any secrets in the muck, human. You either, Wintergrue!" Oddsgod's tendrils sketched a question mark beside a Quaoran interrogation-chop. "Say, are you about to tip?"

"I see rudeness is not confined to humanity," Wintergrue observed.

Brick said, "I called you out of courtesy, excellency." He sketched out the situation. "Expect a burn soon."

"So begins the fabled All-System Exposition," Oddsgod gloated, tentacles forming the outline of a fish floating upside down, X for an eye.

"I know you gain great prestige from any embarrassment to Quaoar," Wintergrue said. "No need to drain a dead husk."

"Oh, don't worry. Time's current will bring our own Worlds' Fair along soon. I wager we'll learn from your mistakes."

"Start by learning some quiet, excellency," Brick said. "Kyb, punch it soon as the yacht lights. No matter where the rest of us are."

"I don't have much propellant reserve," Kyb said, "if we're still going to decelerate for Quaoar rendezvous."

"Forget rendezvous. Shoot us past Quaoar in an Oberth maneuver, close enough to wave, and get as much speed as you can. Just make it clear we won't *hit*. We'll have to hope they'll reel us in eventually, since one of their people is on board."

"They might do that," Wintergrue said. "*They* are polite."

"Oh, your words *wound* me," Oddsgod said, tendrils doing a passable rendition of the face in Munch's *The Scream*.

"Enough," Brick said. "We give diplomats passage as a courtesy to your governments—"

"A courtesy unnecessary if not for the ban on civilized tech in your deeper system," Oddsgod shot back. "Mass-driver launch tubes! Antimatter gas core engines! Ten-year transits! Hibernation! Even the *Erisians* could do better."

*Yeah*, Brick grunted to himself, squinting at Oddsgod's mobile aquarium, *you Orcans love your contraptions, don't you. Come to think of it, you're awfully fond of robotics . . .*

"Captain," Merc muttered, interrupting his thought, "where is the Erisian?"

Brick frowned. The babbling octopus-vulture-thing should have popped up by now. His excellency the babbling octopus-vulture-thing. "None of you have seen him?"

Humans and aliens communicated their one point of unanimity.

"Damn it," Brick said. "Kyb?"

"Can't find him," Kyb admitted. "We're not exactly a fortress here, Captain. And Erisians do have a reputation for sneakiness."

"Enough. Ladies and gentlemen and indefinites, prepare for a burn." Brick cut off contact with the diplomats. "Merc, get the VIPs to the storm cellar. Dagger, grab a scanner and find that Erisian." He hesitated. "Grab a pistol, too."

"You think he's in league with the pirates?" Dagger said, her tone sharp. Brick sensed a lecture coming. "Get a grip, Brick. Erisians are annoying, but they're honest to a fault. That's part of why they're annoying."

Dagger was always telling him to *get a grip*. Good general advice on a spaceship, of course . . . but she meant much more.

*I mistrust the aliens' power and position, Brick, she'd said before. If I could ever find a way to get our whole system back, I'd probably kill for it. But you—I think 'foreign devil' isn't just an expression for you. I think you literally believe they're monsters.*

Brick snapped, "Just get 'em *all* into the cellar and in the rescue balls. That way if they make a fuss all they'll do is play pool."

"That game sounds weirder every time you talk about it, Captain," Merc said. "Loadmaster out."

There was a pause, then: "Dagger out."

Brick said, "Kyb . . . keep paranoid."

"You don't have to ask. It's dark out here."

"Captain out."

Silence and stars again. Brick frowned anew at the mystery yacht. Might it really be just a Loaded eccentric, out where he didn't belong? *Give me a clue*, Brick thought.

For an instant there flickered in his goggles' display an odd message, sandwiched between the distance and velocity estimates.

*Beware the Eagle.*

It was there and gone, like a quote on the Cislunar Stock Exchange.

The lack of tags made the message seem tight-beamed to the goggles, not pulled from *Eight Ball's* network.

"Give me another clue," he said hopefully. Nothing happened.

Grunting, Brick tapped his goggles and blinked. Data flickered as he tried to determine who'd sent the message. He found no trail.

Was somebody on board sending a private warning? Or . . . he frowned out at the darkness. It was unlikely, but not impossible, the message actually came from the yacht.

Brick cursed and keyed a virus purge. The world dissolved into fuzz. He pulled up the goggles. The blurry view from his gee-damaged eyes was not a huge improvement, but at least he could get around . . . and any viruses recently implanted would be caught. He raised Kyb again.

"A shipwide purge?" she repeated. "I haven't detected any signals..."

"Guess it's my turn to be paranoid," Brick said. "Run it. And Kyb . . ."

"Captain?"

"Check the registry for yachts named *Eagle*. Captain out."

Brick stared a moment longer at the stars, those uncatchable bright fish, thinking of old books and ships and storms. He ran a finger along a chart book's spine, recalling a ballad of the thirteenth century, and a knight commanded to sail in bad weather.

Murmuring aloud, Brick repeated Sir Patrick Spens' words to his crew: "*Mak hast, mak haste, my mirry men all / Our guid schip sails the morne . . .*"

And he answered himself as had Spens' crew: "*O say na sae, my master deir, / For I feir a deadlie storme.*"

Wet sea or dark, Brick could empathize. There was a hint in the ballad that the knight had earned enemies, and Brick could relate to that too. Out of need, but more out of anger at the *Gwai Lo* and the humans who kissed their tendrils/manipulators/feet, Brick once had stolen and smuggled, old books being his specialty. He had

concerns about his passengers, but truth to tell, any observer who knew his past would suspect Brick first of all. If pirates were coming, that was surely his karma. Perhaps he should accept it with the solemn grace of a Sir Patrick Spens, sailing to a fifty-fathom grave.

He spat into his cup again and withdrew from the stars. He'd better check his treasure.

Back in the ship's guts, with fish poking about the bubble, Brick slipped through the hatch below and pulled himself by handholds through the cluttered chart room. From there he nosed through the hatch into the axial ladder. Face-first, he descended.

The ladder was a twenty-five-meter crawl from bow to engine room. The trip was like a caving expedition through tangles of ducting and cables and pipes. Brick's face felt the tug of air vents, the vibration of motors, the tickle of air freshener strips.

Brick wasn't going all the way, just a deck down.

Everything looked as expected when he reached his office: neat and ordered, the wall displays flickering with the virus purge.

As expected—except for the alien crouched upon the steel-mesh desk.

The Erisian Ambassador to Earth (currently non-resident) stared with carrion-eater eyes. One hand on his blade, Brick stared back. His goggles should be fine now; he swallowed and with his free hand pulled them down. His vision clarified, and he beheld a thing out of nightmares.

The alien had its tentacles around the cryptbox like a tomb robber getting better acquainted with King Tut. Only in this case, the robber resembled some mutated Egyptian bird-god (vulture-headed, fish-gilled, bat-winged, and tentacled like an octopus shy two limbs, the whole package wrapped in corpse-grey skin); and the sarcophagus was instead a black slab proportioned like a briefcase. Red death's-heads flickered across its surface. The cryptbox was magnetically clamped to the desk, and the ambassador did not seem to be trying so much to remove it, as caress it. That was disturbing enough.

It was even worse that the Erisian didn't so much as glance at the box. Instead it focused on the human as though the antics of its own writhing tentacles were beneath its concern.

"Stop staring at me," Brick said, "and attack or something."

"I pray your forgiveness," the alien kawed politely. "I'm waiting for your death."

"Beg pardon?"

"How to explain . . . My people evolved to spy carrion littering land, or drifting listless on the sea. When you hold still, my inner scavenger snaps awake."

Brick shivered. "You're not exactly calming me down."

"I am not here to kill you, Captain Chin."

"Huh. So what are you doing, Ambassador? Excuse me: thief."

"I am not here to steal. I came to speak to you, then heard the shipwide alarm. Fearing the worst, I investigated your office. I crave the safety of the artifact, as do you."

As the Erisian spoke, the viewer behind it resumed its normal schematic of the solar system, with the words *No Virus Detected* covering the eight inner planets of Sol-Gov and the myriad alien-settled iceworlds of the Kuiper Belt.

"Artifact?" Brick said, with a twinge more confidence. "That's just my MacGuffin."

"MacGuffin?"

"It's a human term for old movies. This particular one is called *Psycho*. A classic. Ever see it?" Brick smiled evilly and drew the knife. He twisted a knob and a little display in the hilt switched from *Q* to *E*.

The Erisian closed double membranes over its multifaceted eyes, opened them again. "I know what truly occupies the box, Captain Chin. I know also that a menace occupies your vessel."

"No shit, Sherlock. You break into my office, Ambassador Vul-ah-er . . ." As a dozen times before, Brick's tongue tripped on his passenger's name.

"I am Vulchuglurian Rogatnigok [SCREE] Gowlakach, of Eris and the Darkensea Aerie."

"Ambassador Vulch. You break into my office, and you're talking about threats? It's all clear now. A robot pirate ship wouldn't be half as effective without an inside man."

"Fool," Vulch squawked. "Pirates are not your chief concern. Grave danger lurks on board *your* vessel . . ."

"I'm with you there."

" . . . a disciple of universal night, a pawn of the Devourers, an emissary of cosmic heat death. *You cannot conceive your peril!*—!"

As the Erisian spoke, a fit engulfed it. The tentacles released the cryptbox and whipped the air as though in ecstasy or terror. The motion revealed the Erisian's marsupial-like pouch, previously concealed by the ropy limbs. Brick saw various artificial objects protruding from the lip. He saw a tentacle drift toward one. He acted.

Brick yanked himself into the room at an angle, thumbing two buttons on his hypoknife as he came astride the Erisian's open beak.

The blade shot from his hand on a jet of compressed air, giving Brick a slight impulse backward, as he'd intended, into his bookshelf.

Meanwhile the blade sank into the Erisian's left shoulder.

Brick plowed into his collection, somewhere between *Great Martian Pulps #5: A Princess of Virginia* and *A Child's Christmas on Europa*. With his free hand he ripped a book from its velcro. As the Erisian, tentacles quivering, looked up, it received Volume One of the *Encyclopedia Luna* (A to Antimatter) square in the snout.

The Erisian cartwheeled. Ambassador Vulch was resilient, and quickly braced itself against the bulkhead. But the hypoknife still sprouted from its shoulder, and its movements slowed.

The ampoule he'd loaded was prepped for Erisians. Kyb wasn't the only paranoid one.

"Fool!" croaked Vulch, wings aqiver. "So bigoted are you . . . you ignore the evil behind human faces."

Adrenalin screaming in his veins, the words foamed out of Brick like water from a burst canal. "We didn't ask you to come to our system, *Gwai Lo!* To crash our economy, make my family broke—"

He caught his breath, mastered himself. "What do you mean? Evil behind human faces?"

"Beware," Vulch croaked, "the Evangelist . . ." Then the membranes fluttered over its multifaceted eyes. From time to time they flickered open and closed again.

"Perfect," Brick called to the unseen, unseeing heavens, and swore oaths against foreign devils of all species.

When his fight-haze cleared, Brick gingerly recovered the encyclopedia volume, then yanked the groaning Erisian to the office hammock. A few old fisherman's knots and the intruder was secured. Purple drops of Erisian blood drifted like spilled wine. Brick left the hypoknife in place. If he had to stow the alien here, he might as well leave it sedated; the blade would dose Vulch at intervals. Vulch muttered something about "Logovores" and "star death" and "devouring." Probably random nonsense.

Brick yanked the cryptbox loose from the table's magnetic mesh. Since the box wasn't screaming, he knew the lock was intact.

Now, just as the Great Powers could swat aside his vessel, they could sidestep mere quantum encryption. But the best *Erisian* tech, Brick knew, was only a step ahead of humanity's.

And yet. He had to check.

Though Brick wanted to yank the box open, instead he located a serene haven in his psyche's stormy sea, the image of his family's old redoubt on Mars. In his mind's eye he walked the island estate and found a bottle glinting in the sand. The message inside was a series of numbers which Brick (back turned to the *Erisian's* fluttering eyes) traced upon the box's metal.

This sequence, fed by an implant in Brick's brain, matched a sequence in the lock. Implant and lock were linked by quantum entanglement, acting as one physical system, despite their separation. *Spooky action at a distance*, as Einstein long ago put it. Brick should relax. Old Albert had his back.

He opened the box.

*Eight Ball's* portion of the *Book of Kells* was gone.

The worst of it, Brick thought as he regarded the empty box, was that he'd leapt to haul this treasure. Other captains back at Lagrange Four muttered SolGov had gotten giddy about this Exposition . . . that even under-armed freighters ran bloated with swag. But Brick, book-loving Brick, had been too dazzled. He still had connections from his smuggling days, and from the days he'd turned informant. They'd come through for him.

*You just steer the ship*, SolPol Officer Wigness—now Program Specialist for Museums and Cultural Objects Wigness—had soothed. *The cryptbox will do the rest. Top-end security, maximum shock absorption, nuclear bunker plating. Trinity College wouldn't let its treasure off-planet otherwise.*

Brick slammed the box onto the desk and confronted Vulch. The alien hissed something about "rising glory" and its eyes fluttered shut.

Brick mastered his anger, searched the *Erisian*. Inside the marsupial-like pouch he discovered a traveler's medkit and toolkit and . . .

Wonders.

There was a purple scroll covered with Ixion taste-glyphs like green puzzle pieces . . .

A pale Quaoaran memory ribbon threaded with red wormtrail writing . . .

A blue Orcan stem-husk spattered with tiny black words of autobiography . . .

And a yellowed 2076 paperback of *Common Sense*.

"Night Reader," Brick murmured. "You're a goddamned Night Reader."

It was a little like discovering a house burglar was a Vatican scholar, or a Buddhist monk.

The *Erisian* said nothing more. Its wings trembled as it slept.

*Beware the Eagle*, huh? Vulch was the only winged being on board . . . But a *Night Reader*—

Shaking his head, Brick sealed the office and descended the axial ladder. He passed the V-shaped upper split of the laser cannon and paralleled the grimy chrome pillar of the cannon's main trunk, down to the spin ring. The laser was *Eight Ball's* sole armament. Its main function was deterrence, not so very unlike the little plaques outside proclaiming IF YOU CAN READ THIS I HAVE WEAPONS LOCKED.

But sometimes people ignored warnings.

"Beware the Evangelist," he muttered aloud.

"Beware what, Brick?" A glint of polished metal shone from the darkness ahead.

Brick's eyes focused on a cloak pin, blue and gleaming like an icy stiletto. The rest of the speaker was nondescript as a medieval monk. A dark, hooded cloak shrouded

her, secured with a toolbelt instead of a rope. Inside the hood brown eyes blinked on a brown face, beneath coils of black hair. A thin-cut smile curled beneath. Teeth flashed.

"Lo, Dagger," Brick said.

Dagger Meza hailed from the original L5 colony—known commonly as the "Elf Hive." The "Elfs" now endured such choking population density they shrouded themselves for anonymity, camouflage ranging from masks to holograms. Even Dagger clung to the mores, to the extent of going cowed.

Perversely, it was Dagger's modesty that occasionally fanned the spark of lust hidden in her captain. Brick kept it snuffed, of course.

"I said, 'Beware Greeks bearing gifts,'" Brick added, maybe too gruffly. "Or Norwegians. Shouldn't have taken this job."

Brick elaborated, leaving out only the "beware's."

"So," Dagger said, "we've lost the *Book of Kells*."

"One fourth of it," Brick snapped. The ninth century vellum manuscript comprised four volumes, more or less corresponding to the Christian gospels. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John had each boarded a different ship. *Eight Ball's* charge was John, the most fragmentary of the four. (Brick recalled the other three vessels, weeks behind, were more advanced and better armed.)

"I see," Dagger shot back. "Ireland will only lynch one fourth of the crew, then. I wonder who that will be?"

"That's why you're my first mate," Brick said. "All that respect. The book's got to still be on board, or they wouldn't bother with the yacht. I think we can rule out Ambassador Vulch . . ."

"Vulchuglurian Rogatnigok [SCREE] Gowlakach," Dagger corrected.

"I think we can rule the Erisian out," Brick said. "I know that's hard to buy . . ."

"Let me shock you by agreeing," she said. "I've encountered Night Readers. They are insane, sure . . . but they want only to protect the astral essences of literature from monsters from Beyond. Or something. All harmless mystic crap. Honorable fanatics. Like you."

"Beg pardon."

She smiled. "Seriously, Brick. Think of the mass we cart around in the form of books. You're a bit obsessed."

"Doesn't make me a cultist."

"No. You're a romantic. We could be shooting at that bogey, you know. We're powered up, they're not."

"We don't have proof—"

"My point."

"Gunning down innocents, even Loaded innocents, that's *Gwai Lo* work. Buddha notwithstanding, we're not much better. But we're trying, damn it."

"Brick . . ."

"I know, I know, get a grip. It doesn't matter. You still got a scanner on you?"

"Of course," she said, patting her cloak. Medieval-looking or not, it had plenty of pockets.

"Then let's help Merc with our other passengers."

"You believe one of them is our thief?"

"Someone beat a cryptbox. That's got to take Great Power technology. No Ixions around, so that means Oddsgod or Wintergrue."

Dagger nodded. "It did seem strange that we got so many diplomats on this run. If one of them is carrying illicit tech . . ."

"They'll be in big trouble." The *Gwai Lo* weren't allowed to bring their more advanced tech inside Neptune's orbit. Diplomatic privilege had prevented scans or



searches back at Lagrange, but if someone had boarded *Eight Ball* with a super-device, that would have repercussions in galactic law. Of course, discovery might encourage their government to do away with the witnesses. *Eight Ball* wasn't inside Neptune's orbit now. "Let's just hope to God that's not really a Great Power ship out there."

"God may be displeased that you lost the holy gospel."

"You're an atheist, Dagger."

"Just an observation."

As they descended the tangential ladder into the spin ring, they could hear the passengers arguing with Merc.

The spin ring boasted a sixteen-meter-diameter interior, with a corridor circumscribing it and a series of cabins branching off, four for passengers, three for crew. What might have been Kyb's cabin housed the medical pod. If necessary, Kyb's brain-shell could be shunted from the flight deck to the pod. For the others, the ring offered simulated lunar gravity, a boon to health and morale.

Given the snarling up ahead, however, it would take a lot more than spin-grav to restore morale to *Eight Ball*.

Brick jogged up the sloped floor. Despite his haste he tapped the handholds amid the multicolored piping on the right. *Keep a grip . . .* because if Kyb punched a burn, the spin ring would automatically stop. Acceleration would transform the right hand wall into the "ceiling," and the smooth left hand wall into the "deck."

Thus, by the time Brick arrived, arguments had devolved into threats.

A glowering Merc, wearing a heavy toolpack as though geared for a hiking expedition to a scrapyard, gripped the piping on the wall. The Loadmaster, a health fanatic, made Brick feel fat and feeble just looking at him, but sometimes that was a reassurance. Now, for instance. Merc's free hand brandished a hypoknife, pointing at the three remaining Ambassadors.

The graceful, cold-eyed Chodon Yee with her black gown swirling with red dragons still didn't quite seem real. Adding to the surrealness was the ambulatory fish-bowl of Oddsgod (tendrils sketching the symbol of a null set) and the drifting spider-nest gasbag of Wintergrue, whose overgrown child crouched atop the balloon, looking even bigger than before.

"Can't convince 'em," Merc said, "can't stab 'em. You know?" The scars from an Ix-ion's fangs looked shiny around his right eyebrow.

"Captain, be reasonable," Wintergrue said. "We are grown beings, not fresh-cut juveniles."

Oddsgod said, "I *might* feel more cooperative if your grease-monkey hadn't drawn a knife on us."

"Loadmaster," Merc said. "His Loadmaster drew a knife on you."

"I promise you," Yee announced, "none of you will work in space again."

Brick fetched a betel nut, bit down. For all his worries about Oddsgod and Wintergrue, Yee had uttered fighting words. He strove for a diplomatic tone, and got within maybe an Astronomical Unit of one.

"Excellencies. We face potential combat. Safety demands you visit the storm cellar."

"A little late for safety," Yee said, "after you let pirates down our throats."

"Well, if I read the group's mood," Oddsgod said, "you'd better let us sift our own waters, Chin."

"Have you already seized our colleague," Wintergrue asked, "Vulchuglurian Rogat-nigok [SCREE] Gowlakach?"

"He's . . . secure," Brick said, then muttered, "Am I the only one who can't pronounce that?"

"Nope," Merc said. "I call him Squiggly."

"The name isn't so hard," Dagger said.

"That's just 'cause you're the smartest person on board," Brick sighed. "Speaking of which, did you get that last task done?"

"I did," she said, patting a pocket.

Brick nodded. Then he spat red juice. Hell with diplomacy. "All right. You don't want protection, that's your lookout. Address further complaints to the vacuum. You will now enter your quarters. Which will be locked."

"Absurd!"

"Screw that!"

"This is hardly—"

Suddenly Dagger pulled a dark, glinting laser pistol from her cloak. "You heard him."

"You're finished, Captain Chin!" Yee said, as she and her colleagues stalked into their cabins. "You'll be begging for oxygen at Lagrange—" The hatches clanged.

Brick removed his badge, tapped an instruction, and slammed it against each of the three hatch controls. Red lights proclaimed a priority lockup.

"Dagger, well?" he said, donning the badge like a sheriff at movie's end. "Oddsgod or Wintergrue?"

"Brick . . ." Dagger said slowly, studying her scanner. "It's Yee."

Brick found himself another betel nut. "Beg pardon?"

"If I read this right, Yee is an android with an alien coiled in her abdomen. She . . . it . . . is loaded with enough alien tech to cause a galactic incident. Ambassador Yee is an Ixion, Brick."

Brick stared at her so long, he did a passable imitation of a Erisian.

Then the burn began.

Brick admired Kybernetes' respect for orders. He'd told her not to worry about the crew, and indeed she had not.

*Eight Ball* sprang ahead, building toward three gees. The spin ring spun down simultaneously. A jarring acceleration spinward met a punishing shove toward the left wall. Brick's right hand wrenched in its handhold. He yelped with pain, and heard his shipmates doing likewise.

There were small mercies: at least he hadn't been thrown against his first mate.

He let go, slumping to what was now the "deck." Best to ride a burn on your back. Brick's eyes trembled and teared.

Kybernetes' voice sounded in their badges. "You guessed right, the bogey powered up. We're running like hell. How are you?"

"Taking it lying down," Brick said.

"Had worse, you know . . ." Merc said, voice clearer via badge than through the air, what with the throbbing in Brick's ears.

"Think . . . broke finger . . ." crackled Dagger's voice.

"Sorry," Kyb said. "I'm getting a headache, for what it's worth."

"I weep for you," Dagger said.

"Captain," Kyb said, "I'd like to vent some water from the shell. Less mass, and snow might fuzz our profile."

"Do it," Brick said. More cosmic ray shielding gone. Well, he'd never expected to have children.

"Bogey's too distant to effectively tag with exhaust," Kyb was saying. "Not that I want him close. Uh oh, change that from *bogey* to *hostile*. They're firing. Looks like missiles. Might have to get creative."

"You have my . . ." Brick began, then stopped.

He noticed one, then another, then a third of the passenger hatches popping open.

"... Full confidence," he rasped, as he saw three shapes approaching.

"Are you all right?" Kybernetes said. "You sound a little funny—"

"Everything on this deck is fine," Brick said, as the two—no, *three*—aliens drifted or crawled or stepped out of their cabins. Wintergrue wasn't obviously discomfited, although it and its juveniles moved more sluggishly, relying on the little spider-bots to scamper to the deck and tow the gasbag with silver threads. Oddsgod's mobile aquarium strained visibly under three gees but managed to amble around. Meanwhile "Chodon Yee" seemed oblivious to the acceleration. There was even a little spring to her steps. "Believe you me," Brick added, "no one has evaluated a deck as carefully as I am now. Just focus on running. Captain out."

"Thank you for freeing us," Wintergrue said to Yee.

"What's your game, Yee?" Oddsgod added.

"I am a surprise guest," said Yee, in a tone appropriate for afternoon tea. "An Ixion in savage's clothing."

Wintergrue sighed, or rather its transmitter did. "I confess I suspected you were not human," Wintergrue said. "But lacking proper technology, I could not be sure."

"Same here," said Oddsgod. The tendrils sketched a fanged, wormlike shape. "I have to admit I'm surprised you've turned out to be an Ixion, Yee. All you air-breathing warm-worlders are noxious, of course, but the Ixions stink the worst. So, what, did you eat the original?"

"On Earth, only the plant matter is palatable," said the Ixion. "No, not long before *Eight Ball's* current flight, the original Yee had an unscheduled mishap. . . . Don't look at me thus, ice-dweller. I know the emotional cues of seven species, and no, I am not a murderer, merely an opportunist. While I've enjoyed playing the role of 'Yee,' it is chance that brings me to this peculiar feast."

"Given the Ixion hostility to our Exhibition," Wintergrue said, "I find that difficult to believe."

"Yeah," Oddsgod said.

Yee smiled. "You Orcans are hardly enthusiastic about the Exhibition yourselves."

"At least we're in the game." Oddsgod whipped tendrils to make a caricature of Yee, and then of an Ixion bursting out of her like an exclamation point with teeth. "And *our* kind would never hide as one of the scruffy tree-beasts."

"Hey!" Brick snarled. "Are we invisible?"

Wintergrue projected a laugh. The red writing upon its gasbag got jittery. It wobbled a bit. "He has a point. Colleagues, whatever our agendas, let us discuss them privately—in the control room. After all, the fate of this flying deathtrap might merit our attention."

Yee said, "My current form is proof even against low yield nuclear weapons. I fear nothing."

Oddsgod scoffed, rippling its aquarium's water. "Come on! The last thing we need is a skinsuit competition! I second the motion."

"Very well," said Yee. "I *am* feeling an unseemly urge to step on lesser life forms . . ."

As if reaching some Great Power quorum had dissolved all niceties toward the natives, the trio strolled, scampered, and bobbed toward the access ladder. "Wait!" Brick croaked. "Where's the book, Yee?"

"Whatever you refer to, Chin," the Ixion said, disappearing around the bend, "I know nothing of it."

Brick snarled and crawled after the aliens, right hand throbbing, then slumped to the deck. His ribs ached. He tapped his badge. "Kyb . . . company . . ."

"Don't I know it," she answered. "Missiles almost here. Hold on, firing the lasers." The illumination flickered and Brick felt a new vibration in the deck. "Got one. But the second's still coming . . . hang on for a bigger burn."

Brick gave up and heaved himself onto his back. That act saved him from serious injury as Kyb further stacked on the gees.

*Blackout—*

Flanked by pagodas, embraced by plum trees, the manor crowned a little island in the Hellas Sea. The island was artificial, a coral matrix cradling the wreck of a colonial lander. A Chin had served aboard. His wealthy descendants considered the site sacred. They'd set the manor's foundation by hand.

Gesar Chin's nickname was no slap. His family venerated their history, and for a time they'd been, like all early Martians, bricklayers.

It had been too long since he'd fished here. He relished the lap of the water under the pier, the rainbow flashes of the local trout, the lifelike pages of the holo-book above his rod. Multiyear hauls and hibernation had snatched him from life's flow; yet his kin understood that but for Brick the estate would have been auctioned in the hard times, two centuries ago. They called him *Gungun*, an honored elder, and spoke not of smuggling. Still, he was nearly a stranger. He felt most at home on the pier.

He was almost glad to see the flash of the SolGov shuttle.

Program Specialist Wigness was an Earther, a tall blonde Norwegian, and proud of his resulting bulk. He put stolid emphasis into the thunk of false-leather boots as he approached. Brick remembered Wigness' hands around an ex-partner's throat.

"Have you thought about it?" Wigness began without preamble.

"It's too hot," Brick said, slipping into old jargon. "Someone will make a play."

"Even human tech could spot a pirate from months away," Wigness said. "Don't worry, Brick. I'm not sending you to your doom. There are no storms out in the Kuiper's cold waste."

"It's too hot."

Suddenly Brick's holo-display of *Mr. Midshipman Hornblower* filled with static snow. It shifted, growing huge. There was now one vast vellum page, brown-gold, with illuminations like some angelic family album. Four portraits burned within a dizzying frame of Celtic knotwork. There was a winged man in the upper left, and three winged beasts: a lion, a calf, and an eagle.

"Folio twenty-seven verso," Wigness said. "Behold the symbols of the evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Consider the intricacy of line and pigment. Feel the lust of the bibliomaniac."

"Enough," Brick said.

"Very well," Wigness said, and the display flickered through still more pages of the *Book of Kells*.

There were lines of dark, rounded text with capitals erupting into color like peacocks or fruit trees; a portrait of John the Evangelist, as regal as any king's portrait but brandishing a book not a blade; and the Chi Rho page's vortex of color, drawing Brick's goggled eyes surely as the mandalas of his own tradition. The intricacy of the illuminations spoke of such dedication the monks might as well have bled onto the page.

"Enough!" said Brick, mouth dry. His hand blocked the vision as though warding the Sun.

Most Martians sought Buddhist detachment, but they coveted paper books. A historical quirk, perhaps, arising from a culture of epistles sent to Earth, Sino-Tibetan respect for learning, the expense of computer manufacture on Mars, the relative ease of growing plants in CO<sub>2</sub>-rich domes . . . or just plain nostalgia. Brick felt the lure, and had profited by it too.

"All our species' triumphs," Wigness said, as though cracking the covers of Brick's mind, "all our despair . . . none of it means a damn without memory. And nothing speaks to memory like the written word."

Brick wet his lips. "You so sure I've reformed?"

Wigness chuckled.

Fish leapt in the Hellas Sea, forgotten.

—Awakening.

"Okay," Merc said from somewhere as far away as Mars, "maybe I haven't had worse."

"Brick," Dagger's voice jabbed. "Wake up."

Brick's eyes and chest ached. He'd pissed himself, too. He opened his eyes, and saw not an evangelist icon but that of a dagger. His first mate's face clarified, but memory nagged. What had he dreamed? It blurred, like a fish underwater. But his crew needed him.

The three shipmates floated in the shadowed spin ring. Glowpups in alcoves offered a green, spectral light. Dark betel nuts floated in a cloud around Brick. The burn was over, so there was no weight from acceleration, and the ring hadn't resumed rotation.

Brick tapped his goggles. The ship's network was silent. At least he could summon night vision: a grey-white scene etched with a blue framework from ship's specs.

"I remember a godawful clang," Merc said. His toolbag drifted, discarded during the burn, a decision that probably saved his spine.

"A dud missile?" Dagger said. Her robe billowed around her.

"Seems too gentle," Brick said, "and I'm not feeling that lucky."

"Electromagnetic pulse?" Merc wondered.

Brick checked his badge's dosimeter; radiation count was normal. "Don't think so. Kyb?"

"Couldn't raise her," Merc said.

Brick tried, with no result. "If she's hurt . . ."

He grabbed a betel nut, threw it, winced at the pain in his injured right hand. He needed accuracy, though, so he did it again. Momentum pushed him to the "ceiling." Dagger and Merc followed, using air-jets from their hypoknives.

"I'll check Medical," Brick said. "You two search the aliens' cabins."

"What are we looking for?" Merc asked.

"I'll explain," Dagger said.

Brick monkeyed to Medical. Inside, the backup power was active. White surfaces gleamed, including a sphere with flickering lights labeled PILOT KYBERNETES.

Brick tapped his goggles and established a tight beam.

"You in there?"

*Here, Brick . . . scrolled the textual response. What's happening . . .*

"Power's out. You're in Medical."

*Hackbot . . . second missile had a hackbot . . . I managed to burn it off . . . took some hull with it . . . but it decoupled me from ship controls. I think it ordered me sedated . . . I'm on enforced medical leave. She added a green smiley face, squinting and sticking out its tongue.*

"I hate emoticons. And hackbots. Okay, I'm getting you detoxed. We're going to Control and getting you back online."

*Thanks . . . Captain, have to warn you, we're no match for them . . . no Eagle out here, but the profile fits a Full Fathom Five, built at Quaoar's human enclave by a mysterious client . . . dozens of missiles aboard . . . we may be finished but I'll go down fighting, after all you've done . . .*

Then another message, there and gone:

*Full fathom five thy father lies;  
Of his bones are coral made;*

"Those are the pearls that were his eyes . . ." Brick murmured.

Captain?

"Nothing, Kyb. Being senile." His mystery signaler was still there. Either it was someone on board, or a deeply embedded virus.

"And you're being maudlin," Brick continued. "It's the drugs. Hang on." He cut the connection, and worked the medical console. He muttered, "Okay, fortune cookie guy, you have something to say, say it." There was no response.

For *I feir a deadlie storme*, Brick thought, and returned to the others. They were poking through Wintergrue and Oddsgod's cabins, having given up on Yee's. Brick relayed Kyb's words. "She's alive," he said. "But we need her live."

"There's nothing here," Dagger said. "On to control."

"Where the aliens are?" Merc asked.

"They're not one big happy family," Brick mused. "They must suspect each other, just like we suspect them. We've got room for talk, or trickery . . ."

"Or caveman grunts and sharp rocks," Merc said.

"That too. But first I want to see the Erisian. He talked a lot of nonsense before I knocked him out, but he also warned me about 'evil behind human faces.' I think I should have heard him out."

"Brick," Dagger murmured. "I'm proud of you."

"Watch it," Brick said.

"What else did he say?" Merc asked.

"Well, I wanted to ask you about that, Merc. Don't want to pry, but I know you got involved in a cult yourself, once. Was it the Night Readers?"

Merc frowned, ire evident even in night vision. "You think I'm involved, Captain, is that it?"

Brick couldn't help glancing at the toolpack Merc had recovered. Then, despite himself, his eyes shifted toward Dagger's cloak. Plenty of hiding room in either place. He was grateful the goggles concealed his gaze.

"We've all got pasts," Brick said. "You two shouldn't have to squint between the lines to know I was a smuggler once. Kells is just the kind of thing I'd have moved. In my dreams, anyway. Kyb, she used to be a Loaded bastard's slave, maybe the one who's out there now. Dagger, you grew up in a nasty place, thanks in part to our *Gwai Lo* pals. Maybe you wouldn't mind wrecking their Exhibition."

"I trust you have a point, Captain," Dagger said.

"The point is, if I can't trust my crew, I'm screwed, surely as if *Eight Ball* drops into a black hole. We're a messed-up species and sometimes all we've got is each other. I'm making you trust a smuggler, so damned if I won't trust you. I don't suspect you, Merc. I just hope you know something that might give me an angle. Ambassador Vulch is a Night Reader. What's he doing here?"

Merc nodded. "Okay, Captain. Well, I wasn't one of them. That's mostly an alien thing. But we did run into Night Readers, back when I ran with the Moddies."

"The Moddies?" Dagger asked. "Rogue gene-modifiers?"

Merc chuckled. "Nothing so simple. I mean the Church of Christ the Moderator."

Dagger nodded. "Ah, them. They believe reality is a simulation, correct? Jesus was some sort of high-level system administrator?"

"Close enough," Merc said. "The universe is code, Word made flesh, you know. I didn't get all that deep, though. There was a girl involved . . . anyway, we talked to a bunch of Night Readers once, because we had a common enemy. Evangelists of Entropy."

"Huh," Brick said. "Would these Evangelists have anything to do with 'Logovores'?"

"Logovores! Sure. Haven't heard *that* word in a while. Tall tales told by aliens. Dead gods of space, you know, waiting for the day when they'll wake up and eat



everyone. Crazy stuff. They can send dreams to their servants, the Evangelists of Entropy, who go steal mojo for them."

"What kind of mojo?" Dagger asked.

"They like to scrag important texts. Kind of like a sacrifice. They burn them, shred them, or literally eat them. They used a computer virus to hunt down copies of the *Leet News* . . . Oh."

Brick let out a breath. "Yeah. I think that's it. The pirates are Evangelists of Entropy."

"It might explain why they've been fairly easy on us," Dagger said.

"Right," Brick said. "They don't want just any cargo, and they don't want us vaporized. They want the book. And it went missing already, so someone on board is working with them."

"It's still got to be Yee," Dagger said. "It took super-tech to crack a cryptbox, and her android body is the most advanced thing on board."

"Not so sure," Merc said. "If it was someone with an alien government, I'd go along with that. But if it's this cult? Who knows what tricks they have? Or what allies?"

"You believe all that?" Dagger rejoined. "About the dead gods of space?"

"The Night Readers believed it."

"Enough," Brick said. "Now we're just spinning in the dark. I have to talk to Vulch. From here on we stick together. Don't want anyone's ghost haunting my ship."

"You're an atheist, Captain," Dagger said.

"What's that got to do with it?"

"I have point," Dagger said. "The two of you are lightweights in a fight. Remember that bar on Titan?"

"I remember," Merc smirked, rubbing the old scar. "I've got your back, friends. You know? Way back . . ."

"I need to draft a memo about respect," Brick said.

Banter got them moving, and reaching the axial ladder was easier with the ring stopped. Darkness was a bigger hurdle, but Brick had his goggles, and Dagger had grown up in freefall. Merc could navigate the ship drunk and blindfolded; Brick had known that since the last refit party. They could handle this.

As they ascended, something shadowy shot from above and to the left, and scuttled up the axis to the bow. It wriggled toward the airlock.

"The Erisian—" Dagger said.

"Move," Brick said.

They "climbed," or in other words, "plunged." Beside the open hatch to Brick's office, dark blobs of goo pelted them: alien blood? It stained Brick's goggles. He squinted around the blots, refusing to take the impromptu Rorschach test.

Up top, Dagger punched controls, yanked the hatch leading to the airlock's alcove. The airlock shared a deck with Astrogation. It could access the ship's exterior on a track parallel with the fishing bubble's. The airlock proper was sealed.

Behind the airlock portal, Vulch's multifaceted eyes stared back at them.

Brick tried the hatch. The safety was engaged. He would need the ship's network to override.

"Vulch! We know you're a Night Reader. Let's talk."

As Brick spoke, Merc pried off a panel and fiddled with the innards.

Vulch's beak moved. Brick put an ear to the glass.

"You will be silent now," croaked Vulch's voice, "and listen. Your foe is an Evangelist of Entropy, who dreams of the cosmic Dark Age when all bright stars die. Then, in a universe of dim red suns, most of the galaxies gone forever beyond the dark horizon, the cosmos will cool. New forces of nature will spontaneously break from the ones we know now, even as the forces of today separated after the primal heat of the Dawn.

Powers you would call supernatural will emerge. In that epoch belief, love, and memory will have physical power—as will fear, hate, and despair. Then will the Logovores awaken from dark comets, to raven and devour.”

Vulch was a little hypnotic when he got going. Brick blinked. “Wait. Back up. The book—”

“Silence! When the Logovores rise, they will slay the rejected and devour the favored.”

“There an Option C?”

“No. *Devouring* is a metaphor for absorption into the Logovores’ life process. The Logovores abhor the notion of other sentient life. They claim to be the first, and seek to be the last. A fluke of the Dawn created them, a freakish pocket of the universe’s inflation spawning a cloud of heavy elements in a manner distinct from later synthesis by stars. This was irrelevant to the cosmos’ overall scheme, but it birthed one lonely gas giant and its attendant moons. On one such moon, tidal forces sparked heat, and there, in an icy ocean below a starless vault, emerged the Logovores. They divined many secrets of the universe, and deduced the coming of the stars and other life. Enraged, they laid their plans and hid, awaiting the Dark Age yet to come. Intimations of that future and its changed forces ripple backward through time, touching their servants the Evangelists of Entropy. The Evangelists strive to weaken the other species, and strengthen their masters, by destroying the vessels of memory.”

*None of it means a damn without memory . . .* Brick thought. Who’d said that?

“They have eaten much treasure,” Vulch continued. “I have known a world with deserts threaded by writings of glass, vast words towering like shining hills, laid down by those who brought life to that place. Evangelists of a crystalline species devoured the *Testament of Life* like fire along a fuse. I have seen a world of hiveminds where entire caste-nests comprise living texts. Evangelists of a gasbag species spread mad pheromones among the *Nest of Nine Million Memories*, scattered its constituents to the winds. I have beheld a distant star graced with sunspot poems. Evangelists of a plasma species—”

“Enough,” Brick said. “I get it. A religious nutcase—no offense—stole the book. They probably want to take it aboard the pirate ship for a nice little ritual with pipe organ and explosives. But who—?”

“No, Captain. *They* do not yet have the book—”

“Aha,” Merc said. The hatch popped.

Brick experienced a confused moment of peering through the crack, catching a blur of movement . . .

And Vulch *did something*, thrust its tentacles . . .

An invisible object whacked Brick in the face. Something flat, solid, but oddly spongy. He tumbled.

He really should have let Dagger take point.

The far hatch opened. Water surged in.

As if to add insult to injury, a message flashed across his goggles:

*Nothing of him that does fade,*

*But doth suffer a sea-change*

*Suffer this*, Brick thought, borrowing a gesture from Oddsgod as the water shoved him back. This time he did sprawl into Dagger.

They fell sputtering into the axial shaft, grabbing handholds as sparks hissed in the alcove and the interior hatch clanged. Merc had managed to close it.

“Bad timing, Merc—but good work! Now . . . Merc?”

“Damn it,” Dagger said, launching up.

Merc was convulsing. Electrocution. The Loadmaster’s eyes danced upward in

their sockets, and Dagger cradled him; he resembled a plague victim in a mendicant's arms.

"His heart—" she began.

"Get him to Medical." They had no medkit, and CPR was problematic in freefall. And Brick would not be free to help.

"You need me."

"I'll manage. Think I know who's behind this. Go!"

She was already moving. Her laser pistol drifted behind.

"Take it!" she called back. "Luck!"

She plunged, while compressing Merc's chest from behind.

*Luck to you, sharp lady.*

Then, "Now you've pissed off an old Martian fisherman," he told the universe, and grabbed the gun.

Before he got moving, he pushed up his goggles. Things went from grey/sharp to colored/blurred. He envisioned lurid monsters of space as if inscribed by medieval monks, scuttling and oozing through his vision's shadowy margins. He dismissed them, cupping a water blob and splashing it against the alien stains on the goggles, which proved to be a yellow-flecked green.

Clean enough. He set off for Control.

But on impulse, he revisited his office along the way. There he found the hypoknife drifting end-over-end through the air. He caught it, and frowned at the stains upon the blade.

Pushing his goggles back again, he blinked.

In natural vision Brick discerned two kinds of alien fluid marking the steel.

One was purple, Vulch's blood.

The other was that same green, yellow-speckled goo that stained his goggles in the shaft.

He studied this weird palette splattered across his knife. He sheathed the blade and pushed down his goggles.

*God might be displeased,* they read, before the message vanished.

"He can take a number," Brick said, and moved on.

Control resembled a small operating room with tables for three patients. The tables were really acceleration couches, and what dirtsiders might take for surgical gear was rather a set of control panels mounted on mobile arms.

The representatives of the Great Powers clung to those couches, idly exploring the controls. Yee offered Brick a cold smile. Oddsgod's tendrils contrived a grotesque human grin. Wintergrue drifted, some of its young upon the couch, anchoring the gasbag with silk-strands. The parent-entity was oriented to stare at the viewer "overhead."

The viewer bore a split image. On the right loomed Quaoar, dark, icy, crater-pocked, yet glinting with scattered lights. On the left, a tri-winged vessel sliced a starfield.

"Friends of yours?" Brick jabbed the pistol at the viewer.

Yee shrugged. Oddsgod's tendrils made a cartoon of a human raising hands in a "got me" gesture. Wintergrue said, "We might have asked the same."

Brick reached the control panel beside the Quaoran, mastering his shiver at approaching what appeared a mammoth nest of spiders. He clung to the panel like a raft. Little ten-limbed creatures watched him interrogate it. He ordered Kyb back on duty; but that would take time. Meanwhile he could access secondary functions, like hatches and communications.

Okay. He was here. Now he had to plunge into the deep water, and act on all his hunches.

"Wigness," he sent to *Full Fathom Five*. "I don't want the job."

"Brick!" came the voice of the Program Specialist for Museums and Cultural Objects. "How did you guess?"

"Beware the Eagle." That message has been bugging me. Then I remembered. To the scribes who made *Kells*, each gospel author had his symbol. The eagle was John's, and we're carrying his book. 'Beware' meant I shouldn't have taken this job in the first place. You were taunting me. Right?"

"My little joke," Wigness said. "The messages in your goggles are inspired, of all things, by ancient junk mail. The virus plays on words you'll find suggestive, muddying the waters, making you jump at shadows. I wanted you distracted. But that first warning was mine. I figured you'd miss the point, and think the 'eagle' was my ship. Or even the Erisian, given your prejudices. Good show. You're not as thick as I thought."

Brick glowered. "How the hell did you get out here?"

"Why, I made it out here the fastest way of all—beamed at the speed of light."

"You got Loaded," Brick said.

"Absolutely. My masters can make a man wealthy, Brick. I'll be doing even better after I deliver up the cryptbox."

"Like you delivered me."

"You weren't listening very well, back at Mars, or else you brushed off my hints. So be it, I thought. My shuttle was loaded with electronic infiltration gear. While you were distracted with that holo-image, I left surprises in your goggles, too deep for you to purge. I took *Eight Ball's* technical specs in trade. I know your ship, Brick. You're outmatched. Unless you want her blown to Quicksilver Scrapyards, hold course while I match velocities, and hand over that box."

"And betray my trust."

"Well, if it weren't for your history, you could probably explain. As it is . . . you could always disappear into the Kuiper Belt. I could even help. I know people, and people who aren't people."

Brick cocked an eye at the aliens. "Speaking of people who aren't people . . . Who's your accomplice on my ship? The Quaoaran? The Orcan? The Ixion?"

"What Ixion?" Wigness' voice gave nothing away.

"Long story."

"You are stalling, Brick. Just give me the box."

"Hey, let a dumb fisherman think it over a little. For old times' sake."

"You've got just a few minutes, Brick. *Fathom* out."

Yee the Ixion said, "You have a difficult-to-digest problem."

"In other words," Oddsgod the Orcan added, "you're screwed."

"This is a quandary," Wintergrue the Quaoaran said. "I sympathize. Do you preserve your ship by surrendering the treasure?"

"Your people wanted it for your Exposition, Wintergrue," Brick answered. "What do you say?"

Younglings skittered; red writing curled upon the gasbag like blood upon snow. "You see us as exploiters, don't you, Captain Chin? Yet we'd hoped this Exposition would improve the pride of your people, your works displayed alongside those of the Kuiper Belt's colonists."

"Then bail us out."

"We honor your independence, Captain. If we did not, your system would be overrun. Your battle is your own."

Brick took a deep breath. Rage would make him stupid. In his mind's eye he transported himself back to Mars, to fish again upon the family pier.

He had to be patient, like a fisherman. There was a chance yet he might pull his fish from the water.

Water . . . He imagined dark seas on an icy world, and the still colder thoughts of ancient dwellers there. He thought of the menagerie of little creatures in the art of the *Book of Kells*, all bound together within illuminated knotwork, as though huddling together against the dark. If Vulch was right, all the *Gwai Lo* and the humans too were like that, in the eyes of the Logovores. Tiny, fragile. All on the same page. Awaiting a sea change, as Shakespeare might have said, into something rich and strange.

*So bigoted are you . . .*

*. . . sometimes all we've got is each other . . .*

"I will condescend to offer advice," Yee said. "You could discard the cryptbox into the water shell, like a sucked seedpod. Flush the water to space. This will give you some separation from Wigness' prize."

Oddsgod's tendrils formed a pair of dice. "An interesting gamble!"

"We would regret its loss," Wintergrue said, "but this tactic might save you."

Brick tapped a control.

"That's interesting," Wintergrue said. "Why are you opening an interior airlock?"

"You're adopting my suggestion, Chin?" Yee said. "That is surprisingly astute."

"If premature," Wintergrue said. "You haven't shifted that airlock to the outer hull, Captain. Water will spill into the interior. Perhaps you've 'tipped'?"

Brick set up a shipwide conference, pumped it to loudspeakers. "Dagger. How's Merc?"

"Stable." Dagger said, relief burnishing her voice. "Got his heart going. When he wakes he'll feel like *Eight Ball* rolled over him, but he'll live."

Brick let go a long breath. Something was going right. "Thank you. Now, I've got to ask for more, first mate. You're probably covered in that green goo that was floating around my office and in the shaft. You've got a lab there. You're probably smarter than anyone else aboard. Quick analysis?"

"Of course . . ." she said, the question in her voice unstated.

"I'm happy your grease monkey will live," said Oddsgod, "but what's this 'goo'?"

"Loadmaster," Brick said. "My Loadmaster will live. And let's review a few things. My old pal out there is awfully insistent I surrender the cryptbox. Not the *book*, mind. The *box*. Like he's begging me to put one over on him . . ."

The klaxon rang.

Brick stared at the screen, which had automatically formed a triptych. Between the smooth orb of Quaoar and the sharp wedges of *Full Fathom Five* there glided a thing like an immense crystalline icicle, glinting with greens-blues-purple, tapering toward an auroral engine plume.

Brick's heart hammered. That New Lhasa-sized monster could make *Eight Ball* disappear with one cold look.

"An Orcan warship?" Wintergrue said. "Here? You'd actually risk a conflict with Quaoar?"

"Hey, life's a gamble," Oddsgod said, tendrils sketching a cartoonish hand of cards.

Brick consulted his panel. "They're not signaling."

"Not that you can detect," Yee said.

Brick stared at Oddsgod, weird anenome-thing from an icy moon of a distant sun, so like the world of the Logovores . . .

*Deep breaths, Brick. Keep a grip.*

"I've got it," said Dagger. "The green material is stomach residue from an Ixion. Looks like it was eating some kind of processed beef with a peculiar garnish . . ."

"Define peculiar."

"Well, there's iron gall, orpiment, lapis lazuli . . ."

"Thank you." Brick scowled at Yee, raised the laser pistol.

"You have an Orcan warship out there, and you're worried about me?" Yee scoffed. "Was my breakfast that offensive?"

"You tell me. But first, go back to what you just said. You encouraged me to put the *box* into the water shell, so I could flush the *book* to Wigness. Maybe you knew who really had the book, and where he was. Vulch . . . you back in?"

There was a caw of assent.

"Come to Control. It will be all right."

Brick shut the airlocks. He held a finger over the red switch that would flush the water shell.

"Acceleration has damaged more than your eyes, Captain Chin," said Yee. "Whatever you're accusing me of, my skinsuit protects me from laser shots, projectiles . . ."

Brick saw Vulch's shadowy form filling the open hatch. He nodded to the Night Reader.

Vulch slid something from his pouch, something shimmering and transparent, something that had, earlier, whacked him in the face . . . something his vision couldn't really process.

Or rather, not his vision, but the computer-generated images in his virus-compromised goggles.

*Beware Erisians bearing gifts*, goaded Wigness' viral program. But now Brick knew to ignore it. "How about that famous Ixion indigestion." He caught the control panel between his knees and opened his left arm.

Vulch guessed his gambit and tossed the invisible thing. Brick caught it, felt its weight like a wide, flat slab. He thrust it toward Yee.

"Remember this?"

Yee vomited.

Green ooze bubbled up between the buttons of her gown. Brick's eyes widened as pressure parted the fabric and he beheld her android body's navel, saw that it doubled as a tooth-encrusted mouth.

The body itself stood impassively, still smiling, as the true mouth heaved green blobs.

Brick fired into the maw. His right hand ached, but he kept the beam focused.

The android body darkened at that spot, absorbing what energy it could. But a vile stench rose from within. Finally, Brick had to let go the trigger, stretch his fingers.

Vulch flapped his way between Yee and Brick. The two other aliens, watching with spider-eyes and tendrils, stared at their immobile colleague/rival.

"Time's up, Brick," Wigness called on the radio.

Still smiling, Ms. Yee said flatly, "They've killed me, Wigness. It's all revealed. Destroy us."

"Pilot reporting," Kyb's voice chimed. "Did I miss anything?"

"Two gee burn!" Brick bellowed. "Collision course with Quaoar!"

"Collision? But—"

"Do it!"

Brick clung to the panel as *Eight Ball* rolled. Their new course further raised their relative velocity with *Full Fathom Five*. He watched the tactical display until the moment was right, then flushed the water shell.

Suddenly Yee sprang toward him, knocking Vulch aside. She slapped his injured right hand. He screamed and dropped both the gun and the other thing.

Then Dagger was there, stabbing into Yee's midsection with a hypoknife. The two slammed the bulkhead hard. Thanks to acceleration, so did Brick.

Wigness' voice snarled, "My missiles were destroyed! It wasn't his laser—and there are no mines on *Eight Ball*'s specs! What the hell are those *things*?"

"Flash-frozen Pacific cod," Brick gasped. *Don't mess with an old Martian fisherman.*



Yee abandoned the crumpled form of Dagger, springing at Brick. But now two more aliens interposed themselves, Oddsgod grappling Yee with its aquarium's manipulators, Wintergrue's young and their robot analogs coiling silk around the three and leaping off to anchor the combatants to the bulkheads. Though the Orcan and Quaoran looked frail compared to Yee, Yee stopped struggling.

Oddsgod said, "Fun was fun. It was amusing to roil the waters. My government doesn't trust cults, you see, Night Readers and Evangelists included. We knew agents of both were going to be aboard *Eight Ball*. I was instructed to tag along and watch, but not intervene unless things got too crazy. I'd guess this qualifies. You've strayed into dangerous waters, 'Ambassador Yee.' Dead or merely blooded, today the current brings you to Orcus."

"Fool!" Yee cried. "One day, even you children of the iceworlds will be devoured—"

Oddsgod's tendrils again sketched a hand, giving the finger to Yee and the room at large. The Orcan vanished in a flash of light, Yee disappearing with it.

Wintergrue remained, anchored by silken lines to a dozen nooks and crannies of the control room. Brick swallowed.

"The Orcan warship's gone," Kyb said.

"Tell me," Brick said, "were *any* of the passengers just a diplomat?"

"I was," Wintergrue said, "though I'm about to retire, one way or the other. So I will say, in my most diplomatic manner, that you're on a collision course with my people's colony, and you're all about to die."

"Now, now . . ." Brick said, struggling to his knees. "I know you've got a draconian reputation to maintain. The thing is, we've got an artifact on board *Eight Ball* that your people specifically asked to see. We're just, uh, delivering it more efficiently."

Brick smiled a friendly red grin, and wondered if it was the last thing he'd ever do. There were worse ways to go . . .

"Captain," Wintergrue said, "it seems to me you could have fired on *Fathom* before it became a fully powered threat. Why didn't you?"

"Gunning down innocents is *Gwai*. . . It seemed right to give them the benefit of the doubt. Excellency."

Wintergrue said, "Interesting."

Suddenly, the acceleration dropped to a light tug. Like a man expecting a full suitcase and lifting an empty one, Brick lost his balance.

The viewer showed a ceiling of ice and flashing lights and metal. Creaks and groans reverberated through the hull.

"Captain," came Kyb's wondering voice. "We're at a dead stop. Inside a hangar. On Quaor."

"Aiya," Brick whispered.

"It seems fitting," Wintergrue said, "to give you the benefit of the doubt as well. Your ship's been impounded for recklessness, Captain Chin. That this act rescues you from *Fathom* is incidental." Wintergrue reeled in its anchoring younglings, in the process picking up some spin. This gave the impression of someone dancing free of a vexing job.

Wintergrue said, "It really is time I cut loose my eldest, before it truly rebels. Soon my people will arrive to secure your incarceration."

"You've never *incarcerated* anyone before . . ." Brick reconsidered the wisdom of complaining about not dying, and shut up.

"We're creative. As are you. It seems every so often your species deals with the horns of a dilemma by leaping the bull, so to speak. It will be fascinating to see if humanity can avoid being gored."

Wintergrue too vanished, less flashily than Oddsgod, there and gone. Like a junk message.

"Bull to that," Brick said, and then, "Dagger . . ."

Vulch already crouched over her. Brick had to contain his urge to shove the carion-eater aside. The Erisian had already removed Dagger's cloak, and though the grey tunic beneath was hardly revealing, Brick winced a little for the loss of her privacy. Then he winced at the nasty cut on her chest, and the twisted arm.

The other arm clutched something invisible, still rippling in Brick's goggles' display like heated air.

"I have given her something for the pain," Vulch said. "I will help you reach your medical pod."

"Thanks."

"Wait . . ." Dagger groaned, focused on Brick. "You old lech, Brick, always knew you wanted to look at me . . ."

"Come on, first mate." He spat. "I'm the soul of goddamn propriety—"

"Shut up. Fair is fair."

She reached up with her good hand, letting drop her burden with a thud. She pushed his goggles up above his eyes.

Through the blur he saw his first mate . . . and beside her, *Eight Ball's* portion of the *Book of Kells*. Its cover was a modern transparent pane, and through it he could see the dazzle of the four evangelist symbols preceding the Gospel of John, the man, the lion, the calf, and the eagle all staring up at him, perhaps a bit reproachfully. He could also see the dampness across the top of the manuscript, and the big bite taken from one corner.

"Now we're even," Dagger said. "You have nice eyes, even if they're nearly gone. But how did you see . . ."

"Come on. As you were, Kyb."

"This isn't good for my paranoia, Captain," he heard Kyb saying. "I've been *impounded* . . ."

Vulch trailing, Brick carried Dagger fireman style down the shaft. He could navigate *Eight Ball* almost as well as Merc could. Damn it. He'd almost lost the Loadmaster, almost lost them all . . .

Dagger said, "No, tell me, how were you sure it was Yee?"

"Dumb luck."

"Honestly."

"Okay. She was a cultist, not with the Ixion government. Seems that even violating the tech ban, she didn't have the tools to break a cryptbox. She recruited Wigness, or the cult did. *He* hacked my goggles, causing mischief . . . including selectively removing the book from my goggles' display. Muddying the waters. He hoped I'd find the cryptbox 'empty,' and leave it open. Or else go along with the letter of his demand for the box. Heh, like I'm that clever. . . . But if that didn't work, Yee was more than ready to get rough with me." Brick smiled his red smile. "But Vulch tripped things up."

"Yes," the Erisian croaked. "After your noble captain stabbed and drugged me, he opened the box and, believing it empty, slammed it down. The impulse pushed the book out—but he did not see it. I, slipping into oblivion, tried to report the *rising glory* of the relic behind him. This was insufficient to alert my heroic assailant."

"Less editorializing," Brick muttered.

"Keep a grip, Brick," Dagger said. "Go on, Ambassador . . ."

They reached the spin ring.

"Later," Vulch said, "I regained consciousness and found the Ixion devouring the book. No doubt it is the fate of Erisians to witness dire violence. No doubt also, the Evangelist of Entropy could not resist sampling her prize before delivering it to her masters. But as I watched, she convulsed, and vomited. I surprised her then, grab-

bing the only weapon to hand, the knife in my shoulder. I lost the knife in the melee, but fled with the book."

"I see," Dagger murmured. "Yee must have crossed over to Control . . . while we were busy at the airlock . . ."

"Later on I found the knife," Brick said. "There were two kinds of stain. At first I assumed the green stuff was yours, Vulch. But remember Titan, Dagger? Ixions love Earth cellulose, but our animal tissue makes them violently ill. You see, those Celtic monks didn't use plant fiber for manuscripts. Today *vellum* is just a word for any fancy paper—but it originally meant paper made from calfskin."

He checked to see if Dagger appreciated his book lore and his cunning, but found her asleep. "Good night," he whispered, stowing her within the pod. Medical devices hissed over her. He regarded Dagger beside the slumbering Merc as he might study a rare tome behind museum glass. It could be a hard thing, sometimes, this detachment—appreciating without possessing. He'd already spent a long lifetime working on it. He'd keep trying.

Vulch lurked outside, clutching the mangled Gospel of John.

"Captain. I am sorry for the harm to your ship and crew."

Brick took a deep breath. "My fault too," he said at last. "But why couldn't you have spilled it all when you boarded?"

"Would you have believed a *Gwai Lo*? You have a reputation."

Brick glared. But Vulch deserved honesty. "No. Probably I wouldn't have. Maybe that's to my shame. Maybe it's best I rot in the caverns of Quaoar."

Brick had slowed, and now Vulch was staring as if at a fresh carcass. But the alien's words were no pronouncement of death. "You, Captain, are a lover of books. Thus you have gazed time and again into the depths of other minds, other times and places. I know it is within your power to look beyond the peculiarities of flesh."

He didn't share the alien's mysticism. Hell, he didn't put any stock in *human* mysticism. And yet.

In John's gospel, Brick knew, there was talk of the Word made flesh. It wasn't *his* holy text . . . but maybe he could take a bite from it, so to speak. Maybe he and Vulch, and Dagger and Merc and Kyb, were all just words made flesh, somewhere down deep. The universe yet in its morning, babbling to itself, trying hard to figure itself out before the night closed in.

He reached out and claimed the book. Then, with it nestled between arm and chest, he took a tentacle as well, improvising a handshake. *Something rich and strange*, he thought, *sails the morne*. Brick's flesh crawled as suckers fastened, as though he suffered a sea-change, feared a deadly storm.

But he kept his grip. ○



# NEXT ISSUE

## JULY ISSUE

Those of us who somehow find ourselves straddling the generation gap, as described by James Patrick Kelly in this month's *On the Net*, are the lucky ones: we are able to enjoy stories by the science fiction luminaries of today and tomorrow, all presented in *Asimov's*.

Consider next month's novella feature by hard SF master **Stephen Baxter**. "Earth II" is a sprawling, exciting adventure across a massive world filled with mystery, beauty, and danger. Upon this grand landscape, the descendants of the original colonists now pursue manifest destiny through the military might of their empire. These brave—and sometimes brutal—warriors must consider some difficult questions regarding the nature of their adopted world, their place in it, and the role the colony's few founders' philosophy plays in their complex and swiftly shifting world. This is Baxter at his very best; it is terse human drama set against ambitious world building, and sure to be on many of your year's best lists for 2009.

## ALSO IN JULY

**R. Garcia y Robertson** returns with a rollicking new world to play in; "SinBad the Sand Sailor" harkens back to both Farmer's *Green Odyssey* and the classic work of Edgar Rice Burroughs as the titular smuggler and raconteur must evade winged pirates, alien slavers from a nearby moon, and the police, as he attempts to win the love of a beautiful air hostess with a real knock-out kiss—this tale's a blast. **Sara Genge's** latest, "Shoes-To-Run," relates one woman's struggle toward independence in a future tribe upon a desolate, radiation-scarred world; **Michael Cassutt's** elegy for the golden age of the space program determines the ultimate fate of "The Last Apostle"; **Kit Reed** warns of the dangers a weekend trip to "Camp Nowhere" might yield, and Australian talent **Ian McHugh** explains the miracle of life through some unusual alien birthing rituals in "Sleepless in the House of Ye."

## OUR EXCITING FEATURES

**Robert Silverberg**, in his Reflections column, swashbuckles through some "Adventures in the Far Future"; **Paul Di Filippo** brings us "On Books"; plus an array of poetry you're sure to enjoy. Look for our June issue on sale at your newsstand on May 12, 2009. Or you can subscribe to *Asimov's*—in classy and elegant paper format or new-fangled downloadable varieties, by visiting us online at [www.asimovs.com](http://www.asimovs.com). We're also available on *Amazon.com's* Kindle!

## COMING SOON

brand new stories by **Kristine Kathryn Rusch**, **Robert Reed**, **Nancy Kress**, **William Barton**, **Carol Emshwiller**, **Bruce McAllister**, **Elissa Malcohn**, **Steve Rasnic Tem**, **Brenda Cooper**, **Steven Popkes**, **Michael Blumlein**, **Christopher Barzak**, **Damien Broderick**, and many others!

**CITY AT THE END OF TIME**by **Greg Bear**

Del Rey, \$27.00 (hc)

ISBN: 978-0-345-44839-2

**G**reg Bear's latest alternates a far-future scenario with a story set in what looks at first like our present—except that a hint of magical powers gives it a fantastic twist. This big, sweeping, heavily symbolic tale is one of Bear's most ambitious, following a string of strong books in a more commercial vein.

One of the book's two plotlines centers around several young people in present-day Seattle, each of whom has dreams of a strange city in the far future, under siege by unearthly powers. Each of the protagonists is in some way an outsider—jobless, threatened, and all but invisible to the system. Ginny has the power to make people forget her. Daniel is something of a shapeshifter. Jack is an itinerant juggler. The only other thing they have in common are their dreams.

But the city they dream of is not an illusion. It is the last bastion of our reality, in a universe under attack by what might as well be called forces of chaos. The central character at this end of the time frame is Jebrassy, who at first is bent on making his mark in a sort of ritual combat popular with the young. He changes direction when he meets a young woman, Tiadba, who invites him to a mysterious meeting at the edge of the city. There she recruits him into a group of last-ditch fighters to stave off the ultimate collapse of reality.

Perhaps tellingly, the strongest tools deployed against the forces of chaos, both in the far future and in our own time, are books. The last bastion of our current world is a large warehouse stocked with all kinds of books, the stronghold of Bidewell, apparently an eccentric biblio-

phile who tracks the minor variants in rare editions as a way of monitoring the shifts in realities. In the far future, an equivalent bibliographic activity is taking place, searching for the tiny number of true books among a huge library. The reminiscence of Borges' story "The Library of Babel," or the still older one, Kurt Lasswitz's "The Universal Library," is most likely conscious and intentional. It's also a metaphor that anyone whose life is built around books—whether as a writer, reader, or bookseller—can readily empathize with. (See also the more recent, humorous version of the theme in Jasper Fforde's "Thursday Next" series—highly recommended, by the way.) But Bear is using the trope not just as a thought experiment, but as a central plot element.

The larger conflict of the book, with dramatic consequences for the universe, depends on the four flawed but determined main characters. Jebrassy faces the most desperate challenge, struggling through an environment where chaos is rapidly impinging on ordered reality. There are points where I wished Bear had kept a tighter focus on the far-future story instead of skipping back to the contemporary setting—but in the end, the plotlines come together, and the complexities merge into a satisfying unity.

Bear is one of the few current genre writers capable of taking on such an ambitious project. One hopes the book will reach a wide audience and that Bear will continue stretching the accepted formulas for genre success.

**PERFECT CIRCLE**By **Carlos J. Cortes**

Bantam Spectra, \$6.99 (mm)

ISBN: 978-0-553-59162-0

Cortes's first novel has elements of a near-future thriller, but spins off into an

apocalyptic conclusion reminiscent of Arthur C. Clarke.

The protagonist, Paul Reece, is the estranged heir to International Mining Corporation. As the story begins, an IMC exploration team in the Congo has discovered a huge artificial structure nearly four miles beneath the surface. Paul's grandfather Hugh Reece, the power at the top of the corporation, believes that only Paul has the skills to learn what the discovery means, and convinces him to undertake the mission.

The mission is dangerous enough—descending to the structure in a special capsule designed to protect a single occupant during a journey deep underground. But success will also require Paul to survive the hostile jungle environment, rebel armies, and treachery by one of his team. In short, everything is stacked against him—in addition to which, he is under observation by the mysterious Dr. Shermaine Mosengwo, a Congolese scientist who appears to be a government watchdog—but is that all she is?

Cortes mixes these plot elements effectively, building tension as we see various forces being marshaled against Paul. Then the plot jumps in an unexpected direction, as an excursion away from the camp into deep jungle brings him in contact with unexpected allies. What he learns there is that the buried artifact is not unique; it is one of several around the earth, some of which have been discovered in the past—and that the entire history of the human race has been altered each time. If Paul goes through with his journey deep below the surface, there is every reason to expect that it will happen again.

The novel isn't flawless—not that many first novels are. Cortes plays fast and loose with some of his scientific material, relying a bit too much on the premise that super-advanced technology left behind by a civilization millennia beyond our level won't make sense to us poor primitives anyhow. This slides over into a sort of bargain-basement mysticism and stereotyped plot elements—ancient astro-

nauts, hidden Tibetan monasteries, Stonehenge, etc. Surprisingly, it works—Cortes's approach to the material is fresh enough to carry the reader with him.

In this respect, the novel is more like some of the SF of the 1940s, including works by some of the most respected figures in the field: Clarke and Heinlein, just to name a couple. I sometimes wished the science were a little more rigorous, but I kept wanting to see what was going to happen next.

The bottom line is that Cortes generates a high-energy plot, with plenty of action and a fair quota of surprises. There's probably a bit more outright brutality in the central action scenes than some readers will be comfortable with; some will also find Paul's back story a bit over the top, and some of the characters border on caricature.

But Cortes is taking risks, pushing the envelope, and putting action and excitement on the front burner. If you're in the mood for an adrenaline rush of a book, with plenty of noise and light and blowin' stuff up real good, this one just might be your dish. Cortes shows enough raw talent to be worth watching—especially when so many other books fall into bland similarity.

## THE AUTOMATIC DETECTIVE

by A. Lee Martinez

Tor, \$14.95 (tp)

ISBN: 978-0-7653-1834-3

A robot named Mack Megaton, designed by a mad scientist to defeat the human race, seems an unlikely protagonist for a detective story. But Martinez makes it work in this quirky, cartoon-like tale of a city under assault and the unlikely forces aligned to save it.

Mack is working a minimum-wage job, keeping his distance from almost everyone. His main goal is working hard and proving that he qualifies for full citizenship. But things go off the smooth track when he walks into an apparent domestic disturbance at his next door neighbor's; a four-armed thug is apparently terrorizing the family. The mother claims



nothing's wrong, but the eight-year-old daughter, April, gives Mack a drawing before he leaves. He tucks it in his pocket without really looking at it. Next day, when the family has disappeared, Mack knows he has to find them. And his only clue is the drawing.

This sets him off on a manhunt across a bizarre future city that mixes the tropes of superhero cartoons with a fast-paced SF detective story somewhat in the manner of Ron Goulart. Not only is the protagonist an incredibly powerful (and nearly indestructible) robot; mutants are commonplace, as are a variety of psychic powers (kidnapped April can see the future). The villain's motivations are pretty much incredible, but this isn't the kind of book you pick up looking for subtle characterization. Nor should anybody expect much in the way of scientific subtlety; this is pretty frankly movie-type sci-fi, not hard SF. But what fun it is!

As in Cortes's novel, a reader might want to check any sophisticated literary standards at the door and enjoy the romp—just as a progressive jazz fan might just want to crank up the volume on some Ramones or Clash every now and then. The book is good fun, the protagonist is an amusingly warped descendent of a thousand previous hardboiled tecs, and there are plenty of points where the only appropriate reaction is a broad grin.

## THE ENGINE'S CHILD

by Holly Phillips

Del Rey, \$15.00 (tp)

ISBN: 978-0-345-49965-3

Marketed as fantasy, this ambitious novel could just as easily be described as steampunk in some of its basic premises—although it's set in a far future, and much of the action centers around engineering problems.

The setting is a structured, hierarchical society on a distant world where the underclass is busily building a huge machine that will somehow change the world. There are hints of a history on another world—ours?—that seems to have

destroyed itself by putting too much faith in machines; but there is also a cult that seems to be working to find a path back to that world.

Moth is a dedicant at the temple, supposedly devoting her life to prayer and religious training; but in the very first scene she sneaks away to meet a lover, one of the priests. That is already enough to get her in trouble; but on the way back from the tryst, she sees a "manifest"—a mysterious object that seems somewhere between a machine and a sentient creature, that shouldn't be anywhere near where she sees it.

Meanwhile, the powerful Lady Vashmarna, whom we learn is Moth's patron, has problems of her own. The shaduah, the ruler of the city, has called Vashmarna to report on the current situation, in particular the shadow cult that may be causing the manifests and creating power shortages in the city. At the same time, her rival, Lord Ghar, who controls the city guard, is maneuvering to have his own power increased at the expense of hers.

Of course, Phillips is setting up a much more complex game than this quick summary indicates. The tensions between the various factions in the city are bubbling toward open conflict. Moth is an intermediary between Vashmarna, the temple, and the barely suppressed underclass that lives at the edge of the city. She is caught in the machinations of these different factions—and as an unexpected consequence of her own actions, is exiled to a distant part of the country.

The book walks a fine line between SF and fantasy—is the engine being built in the depths of the city a piece of technology, or somehow magical? Phillips doesn't really make it clear; she is more interested in the play of character and motivations, and the consequences of her characters' actions are not always easy to foresee.

Subtle, full of well-drawn characters and situations, and considerably more complex morally than much recent fantasy. Well worth a look.

## THE SHADOW PAVILION

by Liz Williams

Night Shade, \$24.95

ISBN: 978-1-59780-122-5

Here's the fourth in Williams's Detective Inspector Chen series of fantastic mysteries that combine Asian mythology with a definitely noir police story, set in a future Singapore Three.

For those who haven't caught up with the series, it'd be a good idea to go find the first volume—now available as a mass market paperback—*Snake Agent*, in which Chen and his partner, Seneschal Zhu Irzh, a demon from the Chinese hell, are introduced. Not that you wouldn't be able to understand this one without reading it—it's just that the series is enough fun that it's well worth picking it up at the beginning.

The story begins as Zhu Irzh and a magical badger, the guardian spirit of Chen's wife Inari, are investigating a rumored sweatshop manned by illegal immigrants from Hell—the result of an economic crash following a war between Hell and Heaven. When both disappear without a trace, Chen has to go to work finding them. As you might expect, what follows is both weirder—and funnier—than any of them have any right to expect.

Along the way, we meet a pair of young Bollywood film makers, Pauleng Go and Beni, who've made a series of smash hits built around a starlet, Lara Chowdijahree. But Lara's suddenly gotten ideas of her own about how her character ought to be played, ideas totally at odds with the sweet, innocent heroine that Go and Beni want her to play. Unfortunately, she's so stunningly beautiful—and so popular with the Indian audience—that the directors know their film's going nowhere without her. Worse yet, she's got connections with one of the other planes of reality—one that, unsurprisingly, turns out to be connected with Zhu Irzh's problems.

As in the previous books, Williams mixes mythologies with a free hand, playing the conflicts between various heavens and hells for all the dark comedy she can milk out of them. The oppor-

tunistic Zhu Irzh again bumbles his way in and out of a series of apparently hopeless situations, involving hostile gods, demigods, heroes, and demons from all over the mythological map. Meanwhile Chen works within and around the system to try to rescue his partner and save Singapore yet again from the attentions of supernatural entities most of its citizens have no idea even exist.

Williams is doing some of the most adventurous and distinctive work in modern fantasy. Highly recommended.

## DEATH FROM THE SKIES

by Philip Plait, Ph.D.

Viking, \$24.95 (hc)

ISBN: 978-0-670-01997-7

In case you hadn't noticed, the universe is set up to destroy us. Nothing personal; it's just the way the laws of physics and astronomy are set up. Plait, the author of *Bad Astronomy*, offers a guided tour of the major deathtraps—and a crash course in astronomy at the same time.

Plait begins the first chapter of the book with a short sketch involving the collision of earth and an asteroid—probably the most familiar kind of cosmic disaster, to most readers. He goes on to explain the science behind the disaster he's just dramatized: what meteors and asteroids are and how often they hit Earth. He summarizes the evidence that it's happened in the past (particularly at the end of the Cretaceous era, when it seems likely that a large impact killed off the dinosaurs) and the high probability that another one just as big is going to hit our planet sooner or later. He also points out that humans could prevent that from happening—if we're motivated enough to find and deflect the potential impactors.

A hyperactive sun, raising global temperatures and threatening to dry out the planet, is the focus of the next chapter. Each chapter introduces a new scenario for disaster: nearby supernovae, cosmic ray bursts, black holes, hostile aliens, and so on—most of them, unlike the asteroid impacts, impossible to prevent. The later chapters offer the long-range certainties:

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## BOOKS/PUBLICATIONS

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the eventual dying of the sun, of the galaxy, and of the universe as a whole. For each, he calculates the probability (supernovae are unlikely in the local stellar neighborhood; the death of the sun, in the long run, appears to be dead certain).

Along the way, Plait uses each of the doomsday scenarios to teach basic lessons in astronomy and physics. For example, the chapter on supernovae includes material on the history of science, stellar evolution, astrophysics, and day-to-day astronomy. In one chapter he estimates the amount of material from the Crab Nebula supernova, light from which was detected nearly a thousand years ago, that will eventually impact Earth at roughly one hundred tons. That sounds like a lot, until you learn that some twenty to forty tons of meteoric material impacts our planet every day—so the effect of the

## BOOKS/PUBLICATIONS

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## ANNOUNCEMENTS

**FiestaCon (Westercon 62), July 2-5, 2009**, Tempe Mission Palms, Tempe, Arizona, [www.fiestacon.org](http://www.fiestacon.org)  
Artist GoH Todd Lockwood, Author GoH Alan Dean Foster, Editor GoH Stanley Schmidt, Toastmasters Patrick and Teresa Nielsen Hayden, plus 1632 minicon with Eric Flint. Email: [FiestaCon@leprecon.org](mailto:FiestaCon@leprecon.org). Phone: 480-945-6890 Write: FiestaCon, c/o Leprecon, Inc., PO Box 26665 Tempe, AZ 85285

## MISCELLANEOUS

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Crab will be at most a blip in the usual bombardment. The text is full of similar interesting facts, related clearly and logically to the sensational scenarios that are the author's purported subject.

After Plait runs down all the possibilities, he calculates the odds of each in an epilogue—appropriately subtitled, "What, Me Worry?" Most of the scenarios are extremely unlikely—we're talking roughly ten million to one odds against a supernova exploding close enough for us to feel, and that's one of the more likely ones. As for the really unstoppable ones, like the heat death of the universe—no body reading this review particularly needs to worry about them.

Despite the scary title, this is a surprisingly enjoyable book, and a great survey of a wide swath of basic astronomy and cosmology. ○

# SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

**M**y pick conventions for this month are NorwesCon, MiniCon, EerieCon, RavenCon, OdysseyCon and Coppercon. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 5 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

## APRIL 2009

- 9-12—NorwesCon. For info, write: Box 68547, Seattle WA 98168. Or phone: (206) 230-7850 (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). (Web) [norwescon.org](http://norwescon.org). (E-mail) [info@norwescon.org](mailto:info@norwescon.org). Con will be held in: Seattle WA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the SeaTac Doubletree. Guests will include: R.A. Salvatore, Todd Lockwood, Geno Salvatore, and many other authors.
- 9-12—SwanCon. [swancon.com](http://swancon.com). All Seasons Hotel, Northbridge (Perth) Australia. R. Morgan, T. Canavan, T. Anns.
- 10-12—MiniCon. [mnstf.org](http://mnstf.org). Sheraton, Bloomington (Minneapolis) MN. Author Karl Schroeder, artist Stephan Martiniere.
- 10-12—American Atheists National Con. [atheists.org](http://atheists.org). Emory University, Atlanta GA. Richard Dawkins, James Morrow.
- 10-13—British Nat'l. Con. (+44) 02174 406-606. [bc2009.com](http://bc2009.com). Cedar Court Hotel, Bedford UK. Tim Powers, J.C. Grimwood.
- 13-23—Sci Fi Sea Cruise. (954) 974-6040. [home.comcast.net/~scificruise](http://home.comcast.net/~scificruise). From Ft. Lauderdale FL. F. Hines. Dr. Who.
- 17-19—EerieCon. [eeriecon.org](http://eeriecon.org). Days Inn at the Falls, Niagara Falls NY. V. Vinge, J.A. Price, N. Kress, J. Sherman.
- 17-19—Chiller Theatre. [chillert theatre.com](http://chillert theatre.com). Hilton, Parsippany NJ. For fans of horror films.
- 17-19—Tribal Forces. [geocities.com/thothscribe81/tribalforces](http://geocities.com/thothscribe81/tribalforces). Homewood Suites, Audubon PA. Adults only. Stargate.
- 17-19—Florida Extravaganza. (407) 650-3810. [fxshow.com](http://fxshow.com). Convention Center, Orlando FL. Takei, A. West, E. Estrada.
- 17-19—Xanadu. [xanadulasvegas.com](http://xanadulasvegas.com). Plaza, Las Vegas NV. Author Robert J. Sawyer, artist Brom, fx pro Joe Viskocil.
- 17-19—UBCon. [ubsarpa@gmail.com](mailto:ubsarpa@gmail.com). State University of New York, Buffalo NY. Gaming and anime.
- 18-19—InstaCon. [alamo-sf.com](http://alamo-sf.com). Crowne Plaza, Houston TX. "The Best Little Con About Conrunning in Texas."
- 24-26—RavenCon, 43031 Elk PL, Chantilly VA 20152. [ravencon.com](http://ravencon.com). Crowne Plaza West, Richmond VA. Jack McDevitt.
- 24-26—OdysseyCon, Box 7114, Madison WI 53707. (608) 772-4455. [oddcon.com](http://oddcon.com). Radisson. Bull, Buckell, Schnobrich.
- 24-26—ConEstoga, Box 700776, Tulsa OK 74170. [scifitulsa.com](http://scifitulsa.com). Radisson. R. Hobb, R. Musgrave, D. Bailey, F. Wu.
- 24-26—Nebula Awards. [sfwa.org](http://sfwa.org). Los Angeles CA. SF and Fantasy Writers of America annual awards presented.
- 24-26—StarFury, 148a Queensway, London W2 6LY, UK. (+44) 07930 319-119. [seanharry@aol.com](mailto:seanharry@aol.com). Birmingham UK.
- 25—Invasion, 643 Longbridge Rd., Dagenham RM8 2DD, UK. [derek@drwhoshop.com](mailto:derek@drwhoshop.com). Barking (London) UK. Dr. Who.
- 25-26—Sci Fi on the Rock. [scifiontherock.com](http://scifiontherock.com). Holiday Inn, St. Johns NB. V. Armstrong, M. LeDrew, K. Tam, W. Meike.
- 30-May 3—World Horror Con, Box 2003, Winnipeg MB R3C 3R3. [whc2009.org](http://whc2009.org). C. Fowler, F. Paul Wilson, J. Gee.

## MAY 2009

- 1-3—CostumeCon, Box 207, Beallsville PA 15313. [costume-con.com](http://costume-con.com). Crowne Plaza, Timonium (Baltimore) MD.
- 1-3—EatonCon, c/o Prof. Slusser, UCR, Riverside CA 92517. (951) 827-3233. [eatonconference.ucr.edu](http://eatonconference.ucr.edu). Academic con.
- 1-3—Malice Domestic, Box 8007, Gaithersburg MD 20898. [malicedomestic.org](http://malicedomestic.org). Arlington VA (near DC). Mystery fiction.
- 1-3—Pulp & Paper, c/o 13 Spring Ln., Barrington Hills IL 60010. [windycitypulpandpaper.com](http://windycitypulpandpaper.com). Lombard (Chicago) IL.
- 1-3—OutLantaCon, 2582 Addison Dr., Atlanta GA 30340. Holiday Inn NE. Martindale, Coriker. Adult GLBT SF & gaming.
- 1-3—Frightmare Weekend. [texasfrightmareweekend.com](http://texasfrightmareweekend.com). Sheraton, Irving TX. Various guests. Horror film.
- 1-4—FedCon, Schisslerstr. 4, Augsburg 86154, Germany. (+49) 821 219 1936. Hotel Maritim, Bonn Germany. Star Trek.
- 8-10—CopperCon, Box 62613, Phoenix AZ 85082. [coppercon.org](http://coppercon.org). Grace Inn, Used to be in September; note new dates.
- 8-10—SuperCon, Box 4012, Ft. Lauderdale FL 33338. (954) 882-2950. [floridasupercon.com](http://floridasupercon.com). Weston FL. Anime and SF.

## AUGUST 2009

- 6-10—Anticipation, CP 105, Montreal QC H4A 3P4. [anticipationsf.ca](http://anticipationsf.ca). Gaiman, Hartwell, Doherty. WorldCon. US\$/C\$240.

## SEPTEMBER 2010

- 2-6—Aussiecon 4, GPO Box 1212, Melbourne VIC 3001, Australia. [aussiecon4.org.au](http://aussiecon4.org.au). World SF Convention. US\$175.

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